

BOOKS AND WINGS:
KEEPING A PROMISE, FULFILLING A DREAM

by Mary Lydon Phoenix

It was still morning when our van pulled into Tiquisate on April 6, 2001, but the heat was already stifling. Tiquisate is situated along Guatemala's Costa Sur (South Coast). Unlike the beautiful highlands of Guatemala, which boast an ideal climate and a rich indigenous culture, Tiquisate lies off the tourist map. Oppressive heat is a constant throughout the year. Only a few artifacts of ancient Mayan civilization remain, stone carvings scattered among the banana and sugar cane plantations.

These fincas provide most of the employment for the resident - largely Ladino - population. During harvest season, the fincas also attract a contingent of indigenous migrant farm workers. Illiteracy and poverty are rampant. Those children who attend school usually drop out by puberty so as to contribute to the family income. The principal of one rural school reports that he has 60 children in the first grade, but only 20 in sixth grade, with six or seven destined to continue on to the next level of schooling.

Why were we here - this American family traveling in a caravan of vehicles which included an old green school bus proclaiming "Biblioteca Mobil" (Mobile Library)? Surely the credit must go to Antonio, child of our hearts, our Guatemalan born son. We came to fulfill an unspoken promise to him and to the people who entrusted him to us. Our hope was to do something to improve the lives of those children who remain in this community.

Working with two non-profit organizations, one American, one Guatemalan, we had arranged to open a library in an elementary school in Tiquisate. Many friends, relatives, and other adoptive families helped make this dream a reality. Most were unable to join us for the grand opening, but we were accompanied by my mother (then 89) and by a group of students from Probigua (the Guatemalan language school which uses its proceeds to fund libraries).

A flock of children surrounded us as we emerged from the van. Then the boxes of books and bins of pencils were boisterously carried into an assembly hall, and everyone gathered for the festivities.

Guatemalans are big on ceremony, so we commenced with the Guatemalan National Anthem (all 12 verses), followed by the salute to the flag. Then came the speeches. Lots of them. Finally, the formal portion of the day was over, and students, teachers, and local dignitaries were invited to investigate the new library.

There was a palpable surge of energy as people moved from their seats to the tables displaying the books. For many of the children, this was their first opportunity to actually hold a book. Some gathered in small groups and shared a single book with friends. One boy methodically took first one picture book, and then another and another, off to a quiet corner, reading each in turn. Even the adults seemed in awe of the collection, which included about 1000 volumes. Books are a luxury not found in most Guatemalan homes - or classrooms.

Since that day, the library at Tecun-Uman Elementary School has evolved in amazing ways. One of the benefits of doing service work in Guatemala is that it's possible to achieve a lot with a small amount of money. The most important addition we made was to hire a full-time librarian. Thanks to Clariza Contreras, a number of things have happened:

- The library is now open 8 hours/day, 7 days/ week
- Tecun-Uman students flood the library during recess and after school
- Teachers are checking out books and other resources to use in their classrooms
- Each month, over 2,000 students from schools throughout the municipality of Tiquisate use the library
- A mobile library program brings books, games, and puzzles to isolated rural schools

And that's not all. The community joined together to raise more than 50,000 Quetzales (about \$6,250) for materials to construct a separate

library building. With the mayor agreeing to pay all labor costs, the new building was completed in February, 2003. In July of 2009, a second story was opened with a computer lab and a large reading/group meeting room.

Another huge change was the initiation of a scholarship program to help children continue their schooling beyond sixth grade. Each scholarship recipient is required to volunteer two afternoons per week at the library. In this way, students learn responsibility and give back to their own community. This year, 2013, we have 23 scholarship students from 8th grade through University.

In 2002, we filed to obtain our own 501(c)(3) non-profit status in the US. Through the Books and Wings Foundation of Guatemala, we will continue to keep our promise to Antonio, and to the children of Tiquisate.

Pictures of the project can be viewed on the web at: <http://www.booksandwings.com>

For more information about this project, contact Mary or Todd Phoenix at: booksandwings@mac.com

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