



From Books to Brilliance Kim Covill

I thank you all for allowing me to introduce our recently formed non-profit, From Books to Brilliance (FBTB). Our mission is to promote literacy in impoverished communities by providing access to books and literacy materials through the creation of lending libraries. Our organization currently works with two rural villages in Nicaragua, and we are now establishing relationships with Native American nations located within the state of New Mexico.

In the summer of 2006, while interpreting for the medical team from University of Texas-Galveston, I visited a depressed elementary school in the village of Santa Rita, in central Nicaragua. In this one-room, unpainted and windowless shack, I was appalled to see



students of all ages practicing their math skills on a worn out blackboard and scraps of paper. With splintering wooden desks reminiscent of the 1950's, a hardened dirt floor, the tropical 97-degree heat and stifling humidity, it seemed like an impossible place to learn. There were no

books. After introducing herself and with the children listening, the teacher proclaimed that "Estos niños no tienen futuro," meaning, "These children have no future." Shocked by such an outrageous statement and saddened by its biting reality, I determinedly began steps to promote the "futuro" of these blameless students by simply providing books.

The following June, thanks to a generous \$3000 grant from the Dr. Seuss Foundation, over nine hundred books for beginning and intermediate readers were donated to the "Biblioteca Samuel Vidaurre", a fledgling library located in the nearby village of Mulukukú. Maggie Covill and Emily Lopez Padilla, two other medical team volunteers, and I purchased the books at multiple locations in the capital city of Managua. To our delight, some of the literature was locally written and published. Once again we traveled in an old yellow school bus, for



several hours over many miles of washed out dirt roads, to this village...one that still lacks adequate housing, plumbing, mail service and telephones. Our treasured books, carefully boxed and wrapped in black plastic garbage bags in case of tropical rains, rode on

top...good company for the medical team's treasured sutures, needles, bandages, antibiotics and the like!

Prior to our arrival in Mulukukú we three women had no knowledge of an existing community library. However, the "Biblioteca Samuel Vidaurre" does exist, and it has a tragic story to tell to anyone who will listen. Grethel Sequeira, the president of the María Luisa Ortiz Cooperative, knows its heartrending history better than most. The library was formed in the mid-1980s as a result of a national literacy

campaign promoted by the Nicaraguan government. Samuel Vidaurre, the son of a local farmer, succeeded in educating himself and slowly emerged as the town's teacher and librarian.

On a fateful day in 1987, Grethel, along with her husband and their four small children, Samuel, and a cooperative volunteer, had to travel to a nearby town. Though fearful due to the Sandinista/Contra conflict, the group bravely set out on their journey. Armed men detained the party on their return trip. The palms of Samuel's hands were smooth, with no



calluses. Suspected to be educated and therefore a threat to the men's political agenda, Samuel was summarily executed, along with several others unknown to Grethel's family. Surprised by the sudden appearance of enemy helicopters overhead, the armed men fled. Severely wounded, but still alive, the children's teacher was placed in the truck and driven back to Mulukukú. He died in transit, and the little library locked its only door. By the time Maggie, Emily and I arrived with nine hundred brand new children's books, puzzles, crayons and coloring books, it had been closed for twenty years!

Coincidentally, an Italian librarian living in Nicaragua arrived the following day. Plans to reopen the library had been already underway!

For Maggie, Emily and I, we became another chapter in this rural library's riveting history, and we were determined to take part in its future as well. We realized that we could continue to make a difference in Mulukukú, and in other impoverished communities, by creating a

program that provides books and literacy materials to citizens who otherwise would have no access. From Books to Brilliance was formed, and in 2008 we received our 501(c)(3) status.

Thanks to the efforts of many local citizens and the María Luisa Ortiz Cooperative, the long-forgotten Samuel Vidaurre Library reopened in 2008 and is again serving its community. The citizens of Mulukukú are unmistakably energized and optimistic. The library has been relocated to a



larger and more inviting space. A handwritten sign boasts its daily hours of operation, and the local radio station invites all to visit and discover its resources. Two very capable and energetic volunteers from the community manage the facility. The community's children eagerly visit to read stories, and teachers bring in their students to introduce them to the proper care of books and the joy of expanding their knowledge. The shelves are organized and the books are accessible to all. Records of daily activity clearly demonstrate the town's enthusiasm for its revitalized library.

Our organization has added more than two thousand new books to the several hundred antiquated ones that loitered in the Samuel Vidaurre Library, unused for so many years. Last June FBTB enthusiastically gave needed math kits, rulers, maps, puzzles, pencils, paper, crayons, coloring books, and more...all necessary materials for an upcoming preschool to be held in the library beginning this year! The Maria Luisa Ortiz Cooperative proudly told us of plans to install tile flooring, and to

build cubbyholes to accommodate children's personal belongings while at the library. During our June visit to the Mulukukú library, it was heartwarming to see teens studying and young children reading and engaging in craft activities. One mother happily told us that her teenage daughter rushes home from school every day, and then races to the library. Her daughter, Sochi, wants to attend college. The Biblioteca Samuel Vidaurre is quickly becoming a center of the community and a cornerstone for education in Mulukukú. However, this library needs books...many books.

Awareness of Mulukukú's library has spread. While working with the medical delegation in another remote village, Don Fausto, a community leader, presented us with a handwritten letter. In this letter he requests our help. He explains that in order "to develop better life conditions" his community also wants a library. From Books to Brilliance believes that the people of Mulukukú and its surrounding villages are now poised to benefit greatly from libraries like Samuel Vidaurre. Central Nicaraguans have been creating a future for themselves since the ravages of war in the 1980's took men from their households and women were left to raise children alone. With tremendous courage and determination the people of these villages have pulled themselves from that dark and chaotic past into a vibrant present with exploding enthusiasm. Their persistence continues. They envision a time when their children are literate and well educated. Libraries with books for all will help to promote that dream.

If you travel south to the village of El Fortín you'll find the most recent library sponsored by FBTB. Maggie Covill, one of our founders, worked with the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire to establish a close working relationship with leaders there. An El Fortín community member, María Teresa, spearheads local development projects. With her guidance, older students in El Fortín now manage the small lending library established this past summer. In a recent email she reports: "Here in El Fortín we are very happy with the library that you donated. Every day more children arrive to work and that for us is giving life to

the library." This new lending library is the first access to books children of El Fortín have enjoyed, books that they can take with them, read and return for another.

El Fortín is located near the city of Granada with greater access to governmental services, though its primitive living conditions are similar to those of remote Mulukukú. A local women's cooperative, La Casa de la Mujer, focuses its efforts to improve life in El Fortín. As an example, the women obtained financial grants from provinces in Spain and France. With this funding, the town replaced ninety-five cardboard and metal shacks with well-constructed permanent houses. These new homes have solid flooring, potable running water and sewage systems.



Other improvements in El Fortín include a commercial bakery that employs local residents who bake bread for sale in Granada, as well as a cattle project for milking and making cheese. Villagers, in partnership with students from the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, have just finished constructing a bridge in town, eliminating El Fortín's isolation during the rainy season. The villagers will tell you that poverty has moved elsewhere! El Fortín's confident attitude is remarkable. It is a declaration of self-reliance and optimism by people still living in poverty. We are pleased to be a small part of the growth of this small community.

As From Books to Brilliance looks enthusiastically to the future we continue to refine our efforts. Our experiences have indicated that these small successes have been tied to certain characteristics. We recognize that both Mulukukú and El Fortín are organized communities. They have strong cooperatives and have sought outside help. Medical teams

from the United States volunteer in Mulukukú regularly. El Fortín collaborates with Spain and France, as well as with UW-Eau Claire. These villages work to define a path to their future. What makes for a successful library project? We suspect the answer to that question lies in characteristics both villages possess...hard work, persistence, self-reliance and appreciation.



As FBTB strengthens each of these libraries by continuing to add books and materials, we also collaborate with local literacy advocates. Our organization and the library managers plan to work with the teachers of local elementary schools to launch reading challenges for students.

This summer we expect to see students' drawings of their favorite books displayed in each of the two villages' schools and libraries. Since local schools have almost no books with which to teach, FBTB also hopes to supply the libraries with class sets of storybooks. Teachers would borrow them, and all students in the class could practice reading together.

In parts of Wisconsin and New Mexico, FBTB is gaining recognition as an organization focused on providing access to books by creating libraries in impoverished communities. As examples of our growth two student organizations at the University of Wisconsin-Eau Claire, La Sed and the Latin American Studies Club, held fundraisers. The Student Organization of Latin American Studies at the University of New Mexico invited us to present our work. An Usborne Book salesperson teamed with FBTB to raise funds through sales of children's books at the

Corrales Harvest Festival, with many Albuquerque businesses donating prizes.

From Books to Brilliance looks forward to developing relationships with other impoverished communities. We are thrilled to announce that Cottonwood Classical Preparatory School, in Albuquerque, has decided to join us in our mission. Members of their faculty travel regularly to Latin America and will focus on identifying villages for future FBTB sponsored libraries. Cottonwood Prep's middle and high school students are excited to get involved in this literacy project.



During the last three years From Books to Brilliance has been fortunate to receive help from many generous individuals and organizations. The



people of Mulukukú and El Fortín are very grateful! FBTB envisions that both libraries will grow and emerge into a type of community center. A library filled with books, maps, puzzles, coloring books, games and computers will provide a venue for all in the community to gather. It will serve as a place to read, study, think,

meet, recreate, and to dream of a better future...a brilliant future made possible by literacy! The founders of From Books to Brilliance believe that our small and initial effort can turn into something great, serving an ever-growing population well into the future.

You can learn more about From Books to Brilliance at:

<http://www.frombookstobrilliance.org/>

Rushton's comments:

When new members come into the club, often I or one of the other folks on the programs team will contact the new member to ask if he or she might be willing to provide a program for the club. Getting the chance to hear of the passion and dedication of our fellow Rotarians is something that I treasure as part of Rotary, and Kim's work with From Books to Brilliance is a wonderful example of Service Above Self.



the Vidaurre Library today

Please leave a comment following the meeting welcoming Kim to our club. As you go through your week, please also keep an eye out for more of these stories - stories that remind us of what is possible, and that tell of our shared commitment to a better world.