

International Leads

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Libraries in Guatemala travel a tough road

By Linda Whinnery

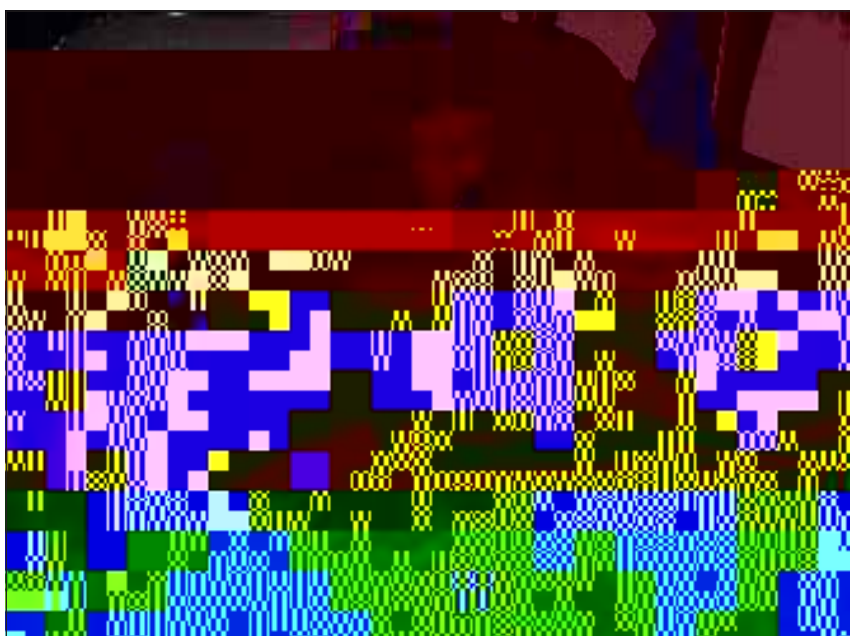
A converted school bus bounces over dusty cobblestones and rumbles to a stop by the central plaza and church. Within minutes, a class of excited fourth-graders forms a line to show the bus driver clean hands before they board the *Bibliobus* (library bus) to get their hands on something their town doesn't have: books.

This scene is repeated every week in various towns surrounding the city of La Antigua, Guatemala, thanks to the vision of one Guatemalan of Mayan descent, Rigoberto Zamora Charuc, founder of PROBIGUA and the *Bibliobus*. The bus is one of 23 libraries that Zamora Charuc supports with funds from the school he started to teach Spanish to foreigners.

Charuc's support of libraries gained the attention of the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation, which provided a grant that put computers in PROBIGUA's libraries. These now help provide access to information and additional skills.

Beauty and Poverty Side by Side

Guatemala is slightly smaller than the size of Tennessee. It is a spectacular country of patchwork rolling fields and steep volcanoes that preside majestically over villages and cities. From the Pacific Coast you can traverse through the 12,000-foot mountains northward to the Peten jungle and Mayan ruins of Tikal. Or you can wend your way east along the



Guatemalan schoolchildren delight in one of the books offered on the Bibliobus, a traveling library which serves the towns surrounding La Antigua.

jungle-covered banks of the Rio Dulce River, where the first Tarzan movies were filmed, and then emerge on Guatemala's small Caribbean coastline, home to the Garifuna culture of syncopated drumbeats and fresh coconut bread.

Approximately half the population speaks one of 23 separate Mayan languages (not dialects) as their first language. Most Mayans later learn Spanish if they attend school. Add the huge obstacle of starting school in a new language to inadequate teaching, overcrowded classrooms and other

factors, it is not surprising that half of the children fail first grade. Although school is ostensibly free through sixth grade, many families cannot afford to buy the required school uniforms and supplies so their children can attend school. Moreover, the children are needed at home to help with younger children, household chores, and work. Guatemala has the lowest level of education in Latin America, with an average of 5.5 years of schooling. Official literacy rates (defined as age 15

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and over who can read and write) range from 50-70%, with the highest illiteracy among rural Mayan women. Poverty studies of the United Nations report that 57 percent of the population lives on \$2.00 per day, 27 percent on less than \$1 a day. Seventy-five percent of people live below the poverty line. In the past 50 years the population has quadrupled to 14,280,596 (2004 est.), making it difficult to feed people who have inherited land that has been divided into smaller and smaller plots. But these struggling people possess a culture rich in tradition, customs, and incredible resiliency.

In 1954, a military coup with covert help from the CIA overthrew the democratically elected government. By 1960, the country was in the throes of the longest civil war in the history of Latin America: a war that would leave an estimated 200,000 dead or missing and whose atrocities will never be forgotten. Peace accords were signed in 1996, but still face problems with implementation. Rigoberta Menchú, a Mayan woman from the Guatemalan highlands, won the 1992 Nobel Peace Prize. Her autobiography, *I, Rigoberta Menchú*, paints a vivid picture of death and survival before and during the war.

Culturally rich, culturally diverse

When the Spanish first came to Guatemala, they may have felt that they conquered Guatemala, but due to the deeply-imbedded, traditional Mayan culture, Guatemala will never be conquered. It may allow Catholic and evangelical churches to be built on Mayan religious sites, but a careful observer will see Mayan beliefs blended with other imported religions. While the culture and customs are strong in some places, it is changing in other locations. While some women spend their days weaving colorful skirts and traditional *huipil* blouses, others no longer wear traditional dress. Some young people are not interested in learning the traditional skills of their parents. Quietly and privately they face

the challenge of an uncertain future. Some Guatemalans believe the key to progress is education and the foundation of education is reading, books, and libraries.

The government has neither the resources nor the infrastructure to support libraries. Few people pay the taxes that do exist, which leaves very little money to cover so many services. A history of corruption and deception makes it difficult for people to look to the government for assistance. In some cases, local city government provides space in its buildings or small salaries for library employees, but most books and libraries are funded by organizations such as Zamora Charuc's, with assistance from foreign donors.

Libraries must be privately supported

The stories of the libraries are as varied as the libraries themselves that have sprung up like rare flowers in various locations around Guatemala.

A University of California (Santa Cruz) professor, Barbara Rogoff, came to Guatemala to work on her thesis and wound up founding a library in San Pedro de la Laguna (Lake Atitlan). Across the lake in Panajachel, author Ann Cameron helped the community find resources to build a beautiful library, one of the few that allows children to take books home.

U.S. psychologist and paraplegic Dr. Jean Uelmen moved to Guatemala and, with Guatemalan Teresa Quiñonez, built Ventanas Abiertas (Open Windows), one of the most successful libraries and after-school programs in the country. It is located just outside La Antigua in San Miguel Dueñas.

Nina Jorgensen from Sweden started libraries under the name *Vamos Adelante* (Let's Move Forward), which provides education, health and nutrition services to poor people in over 18 villages in the Esquintla region.

Two other groups, the Riecken Foundation and the Rudder Foundation, continue to support libraries and learning centers by providing training and distributing

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Message from the IRRT Chair

By Nancy Bolt

I am ending my year as Chair of IRRT. I have enjoyed it immensely. My previous commitment to international libraries and global understanding through libraries has just been increased by my work with IRRT. Who could not be inspired by the dedicated work of all of our committees and the services we are able to provide for the international librarians who join us at conference?

This year's work has been dominated by three major efforts. First, we have undertaken a revision of the Officer's Manual. I know that sounds very simple, but it is a huge document that outlines every aspect of how IRRT works. And it has not been revised for many years. The information was not only dated but also erroneous and cumbersome in a printed format. It provided insufficient guidance to committee chairs as to how they should do their work.

The revision will be mounted on the web rather than in print. It will include information about each committee, its charge, key activities, relation with the International Relations Office, and a timeline for the committee's activities during the year. It will also include an updated history of IRRT and a special feature highlighting all the activities that IRRT provides for international visitors at the annual conference.

The second major activity was to work with the International Relations Committee to draft a strategic plan for international work that is keyed to ALA's new plan *ALA Ahead to 2010*. It was nice to discover that an emphasis on international relations has been in place in ALA since 1942. ALA's Charter

Interested in the *International Strategic Plan*? Keep reading!

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Michael Dowling reveals more about the plan

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of 1879 was revised in 1942 to explicitly expand ALA's scope from promoting library interests just in the United States to promoting library interests "throughout the world."

The third major activity was to select the key people who present IRRT to the public. At the midwinter meeting, the IRRT Publications Committee recommended and the IRRT Board approved two new editors for IRRT. Heath Martin is the new editor of *International Leads* and Joan Weeks will be the new web editor as of July 2005. Both will keep IRRT members and others interested in international

relations up to date on what's happening in IRRT.

Finally, last year, IRRT members approved a change in the dues structure that allows international librarians to join for free. We have been recruiting members all year and hope to increase this effort. The international librarians still have to be members of ALA, but once that is in place, they can join IRRT at no cost. This should help us grow. If you are an international librarian or know any, please pass this information on so we can get new members.

In addition to providing great activities and events for our international visitors in Chicago, the IRRT Board will be dealing with several critical issues at this year's conference:

- considering a policy of approving library school student chapters in the international relations arena
- deciding if *International Leads* should be used as membership promotion (free on the IRRT website) or a membership benefit (only available to members)
- deciding if contact information about all committee members should be available on the website without a member password

If you have any thoughts about any of these topics, send me an email at nancybolt@earthlink.net.



From ALA's Information Desk

By Michael Dowling
Director, International Relations Office

Help Rebuild Libraries Devastated by the Tsunami

The 'Library Disaster Relief Fund' has taken in \$12,000 so far, but as you know more is needed to help rebuild the libraries damaged or destroyed by the tsunami in 2004.

So ALA is providing an opportunity for all 20,000 plus attendees ALA Annual the opportunity to contribute to help rebuild the libraries.

To contribute, just stop by the Membership Service Booth in the Registration Area to donate by check or cash. Any amount is welcome. Checks should be made out to "Library Disaster Relief Fund." Donations are tax deductible.

Thanks for your donation and help in spreading the word!

ALA and the other members of the Library Copyright Alliance (American Association of Law Libraries, Association of Research Libraries, Medical Library Association, and SLA) have incorporated the Library Copyright Alliance (LCA), whose purpose is to work toward a unified voice and common strategy for the library community in responding to and developing proposals to amend national and international copyright law and policy for the digital environment.

The LCA recently applied for Permanent Status as a National NGO with the World Intellectual Property Organization (WIPO). This status will help strengthen the voice of libraries internationally on these critical issues.

<http://www.ala.org/ala/ourassociation/governingdocs/aheadto2010/aheadto2010.htm>

<http://www.ala.org/ala/iro/international.htm>

mdowling@ala.org

<http://www.ala.org/ala/iro/iroactivities/guadalajarabook.htm>

East Asia and the Pacific go digital at ALA Annual

Come hear digital library experts involved in the latest developments in China, Taiwan, Japan, New Zealand, Singapore, Thailand, and Vietnam share their experiences and lessons they learned at "Going Digital: Experiences from East Asia and the Pacific," on Monday, June 27, from 10:30 a.m. to 12:30 p.m. in the Renaissance Room of the Intercontinental Chicago Hotel.

Speakers include 1) Chao-chen Chen, Professor, Graduate Institute of Library and Information Science,

National Taiwan Normal University, Taipei, Taiwan; 2) Zhu Qiang, Deputy Director, Center for China Academic Library & Information System, Beijing, China; 3) Choy Fatt Cheong, Nanyang Technological University, Singapore; 4) Ian H Witten, Professor, Department of Computer Science, University of Waikato, New Zealand; 5) Akira Miyazawa, Director, Research Information Research Division, NII (National Institute of Informatics), Japan; 6) Sujin Butdisuwan, Dean, Faculty of

Informatics, Maharakham University, Thailand; and 7) Patricia G. Oyler, Simmons College.

The program is organized by the subcommittee of East Asia and the Pacific of ALA IRC. Co-sponsors include ACRL IRC, LITA IRC, Asian/Pacific American Librarians Association, and Dynix. For more information, contact Judy Jeng, Chair, Subcommittee of East Asia and the Pacific ALA International Relations Committee, at judyjeng@scils.rutgers.edu.

Kuwait celebrates first library association

By Mohammed M. Aman

For the first time in its young history, Kuwait now has a Library and Information Association.

The process of approval was very cumbersome, bureaucratic, and lengthy due to security issues. However, with the dedication and persistence of its founders, and the more open and civil society in Kuwait, the Library Information Association of Kuwait (LIAK) came into being with the final approval of the Kuwaiti Council of Ministers.

LIAK had its first meeting at the new Yarmouk Public Library located in one of the most trendy and wealthy sections of Kuwait City on Sunday, April 17. The meeting was attended by most of the association's founding members, whose names are listed below, and a large number of Kuwaiti librarians and information specialists.

This is the second library association to be established in the Arab Gulf region. The first was in Saudi Arabia.

Dr. Mohammed Aman, former dean and now professor at the School of Library and Information Studies at the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee (UWM) 8 -Slif Kuwai8che mos,5 Tcricof

Guatemala

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much-needed books. ASIC, the branch of the Rudder Foundation that focuses on libraries, has a Guatemalan director, Pilar Reyes, who has spent years establishing rural libraries in many diverse parts of the country and training personnel in universal library development. She has attempted to include all libraries, regardless of sponsorship, in her work so Guatemala can move forward together. Books and Wings Foundation focuses on three libraries on the southern coast, the area where the founders adopted their son.

Organizations such as Rotary Club International and some religious groups also support Guatemalan libraries. There are private libraries such as the one associated with *Familias de Esperanza* project, founded by an energetic group of people from Minnesota under the name Common Hope, which focuses on finding sponsors for children. It provides the families with medical services and other incentives, such as the library, to keep their children in school. Some private schools may have a few books in a closet, but very few have libraries, and lending libraries are rare.

There are specialized libraries, such as the El Sitio art library in La Antigua,

and libraries within museums. Reference libraries such as the Duane Carter and CIRMA are resources for research projects and reports. It is almost impossible to find Guatemalans reading for pleasure, even among professionals. Thus, the largest library for pleasurable reading is the American Legion Library that has almost exclusively English books and is used by English speakers living in La Antigua.

A major challenge facing libraries is how to encourage independent reading, a habit not part of Guatemalan culture or tradition. Few teachers in the public schools have been trained in how to foster reading, critical thinking, and problem solving skills.

The Common Struggle to Survive

Regardless of sponsorship, what all these libraries have in common is their struggle to survive. Most have been started by one or two individuals who go back and forth to other countries to raise funds or write grants. In the light of inconsistent funding, it is amazing they exist at all.

Some students who have a bit of money bypass libraries completely and go straight to Internet cafes to download information. Thus, Guatemala is experiencing the gap between those who have access to

information and those who do not. This makes the struggle for libraries all the more meaningful since they become the great equalizer—the one place where people can go, regardless of income, to access information and learn new skills. Through books they can travel to new adventures that broaden the meaning of life and brings hope to a country that is counting heavily on the next generation to solve its problems.

Want a sister library in Guatemala? There are 15 libraries waiting for a match. Contact lindawhinnery@mac.com.

Sources for this article:

- Guatemala on \$2.00 a Day—or less! Fuzzy Math or Cruel Reality? by Robert Stickney [stickney@conexion.com] www.probigua.conexion.com (PROyecto Bibliotecas Guatemala)
- Information Please database, 2005, accessed April 15, 2005.
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Linda Whinnery is a Nationally Board Certified Teacher in Library Media Services on leave from San Diego City Schools to study Spanish and libraries in Guatemala.

International Relations Office

American Library Association
50 East Huron Street
Chicago, IL 60611 USA

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