



The gift of reading

The Guatemala Literacy Project is working to reverse the country's low literacy rates and keep children in school

BY DIANA SCHOBURG
PHOTOGRAPHY BY
JAMES RODRÍGUEZ

When Rotary International President Jennifer Jones visited a primary school in a farming village in Guatemala's highlands and asked who wants to become the country's president, the students' hands shot into the air. Before a Rotary-supported reading program began in the village of Chajalajjá, students would often drop out after a couple years of school. "Reading will change our society," Principal Vilma Nizeth Moreira (right) told Jones during an April visit to the school. "These are powerful tools we are giving children to eradicate ignorance."

Schools often teach in Spanish, but about 25 languages are spoken in the country, and there are few written materials in local languages.

The Guatemala Literacy Project has worked for 25 years to improve reading rates. In 1997, Joe and Jeff Berninger, brothers from Ohio, were volunteering as English teachers at a Guatemalan school that had no books. The two launched a project to solve that. The day the books arrived, there was a huge celebration, and a Rotarian dentist volunteering nearby heard the noise and asked what was going on. "He said this would be a perfect project for Rotary," says Joe Berninger, now a member of the Rotary Club of Pathways, Ohio, which coordinates the project.

Rotarians in Guatemala helped develop reading programs in other schools, and since 1997, The Rotary Foundation has helped fund the literacy project with 48 grants totaling \$6.5 million.

Nearly 800 clubs in 90 districts have participated, making it one of the largest grassroots, multiclub, multidistrict projects in Rotary. The initiative also receives support from the U.S. non-profit Cooperative for Education. "There's a lot of push and drive and enthusiasm that comes from Rotary," says Howard Lobb, Cooperative for Education's director of partner development, also a member of the Ohio Pathways club.

From that initial textbook project, the work has grown to include computer labs, Rise Youth Development Program scholarships, and the Spark Reading Program to provide books and teacher training.

Students pay a fee to rent textbooks, and the money is put into a revolving fund, used to replace the books after five years. "Rotary's donation acts as a seed investment, and when textbooks wear out or become outdated, the school ... can replace their textbooks with their own savings without having to ask Rotary for more funding," Lobb says.

Moreira, the village school principal, recalls a former student who stayed in classes thanks to a Rise scholarship and is headed to university. The girl read a book about Nobel Prize winner and Pakistani activist Malala Yousafzai that Moreira lent her. "Now this girl wants to be as big as Malala," she says. "It changed her life."

Rotary International regional communication specialist Briscila Greene contributed to this story.



When Blanca Mactzul (right) was a little girl, she would eye her grandfather's magazines, longing to read one. Her first book, *Teo El Conejo*, about a rabbit, was one that she swiped from him. "I used to take my book everywhere," she recalls, "even to sleep." Since 2020, Mactzul has been a Spark Reading teacher at the elementary school in Chajalajjá, where she sees the power of books, provided through the Guatemala Literacy Project, to motivate her students to become more invested in their learning. "I was so happy to have so many materials to work with," she says. "In other schools, we don't have those resources."





Rosa Acabal was sure she'd have to drop out after she finished elementary school. Her mother, Leonicia Solís (bottom photo, left), had only finished third grade. But the principal of her school told her about the Rise scholarships, and today, Acabal is in 10th grade studying tourism. She has received strong support from her mother, who raised her and her four siblings alone and built their home with her own hands. Acabal's goal is to finish high school and find a job so her mother can stop working in the fields.



Before school, Yurleny Teleguario sells street food such as *pupusas* and *dobladas* with her mother, María Magzul (top photo, right). Then, she heads to class, where she's in 10th grade studying bookkeeping. "I dream of becoming a great entrepreneur," she says. Teleguario had to drop out of school when her father died and her mother got sick; her family lost their home. She heard about the Rise scholarships from a cousin. Her goal is to make enough money to buy her mom a new house. "Education is very important to me," she says, "because it gives us the opportunity to flourish and progress in life."



Jäckelyn Xiquín Lú (opposite) and her twin sister, Joselyn, studied at a middle school supported by the Guatemala Literacy Project with a computer lab and textbooks. But the family didn't have enough money for them to continue their studies, so the sisters dropped out, earning bits of money from an uncle who is a farmer and learning from their mother to weave *huipiles*, traditional garments. They returned to school when Rise scholarships were introduced in their village three years later, and in 2019, both earned Microsoft Office Specialist certifications in Excel. "Thanks to the opportunity given to me by CoEd [Cooperative for Education], I am where I am today. I am working at a job I like," Xiquín says. "Education helps you to look for better opportunities."

José Luis Chanco (above left) and his family cultivated vegetables for export. "I knew that right after sixth grade, I would join my dad working on the field," he says. "That's what my siblings did. None of them kept studying." But when he heard about the Rise scholarship, Chanco redoubled his efforts in his classes, earning outstanding grades and a spot in the program. Chanco graduated from high school in 2015 and works as an accountant for a pharmaceutical company, using the money to put himself through college. When the pandemic started, he called Cooperative for Education and offered to make math and accounting videos for current students. "If it weren't for the program, I might have taken a very wrong path," he says.



Joe Berninger, Howard Lobb, and RI President Jennifer Jones visit with former scholarship student Rosa Ixcoy (holding baby) and her family. Jones sponsored Ixcoy through the Guatemala Literacy Project.



Jennifer Jones and her husband, Nick Krayacich, (top left) talk with Náthali Batzibal, a student they support through the Guatemala Literacy Project, during an April visit. Since 1997, the project has improved education in rural areas of the country by providing books, teacher training, and scholarships. Former scholarship recipient Rosa Ixcoy (bottom right), also supported by Jones and Krayacich, poses with her daughter and mother. Turn to page 36 for a photo essay on the project.

The power of taking uncomfortable chances

Recently, Nick and I spent time in Guatemala, where we met wonderful fellow Rotary members and families who unofficially adopted me as “Tía Jennifer.”

On the third day, after visiting Patzún in the mountainous western highlands, we set out for Lake Atitlán, which we needed to reach by nightfall. If we took a back road we could get there faster. Locals told us it had just been repaved and assured us, “You’ll have no problem.”

At first, it was a breeze. We wound through misty-green coffee and corn fields covering the hillside like a patchwork quilt. But at a river crossing, we found a bridge washed away. The only way to continue would be to ford the river in our small bus. There were a few tense moments, but we decided to give it a try and, thankfully, we made it across safely.

This adventure reminds me of two important truths in Rotary. One, we rely on local, on-the-ground expertise to do what we do best. And two, sometimes you have to take uncomfortable chances to reach important goals.

Every day, I am honored to learn from our Rotary family. Every lesson is an opportunity to grow, and each story adds a chapter to our collective *Imagine Rotary* year.

JENNIFER JONES

President, Rotary International