Carmelita Reanda was unaccustomed to the presence of elders in her school library, so when Andres Sosof Damian (73) sat down in front of her and her fellow students, she immediately stopped chatting.

Mr. Damian, a respected elder in the indigenous community of Tzanchaj, Guatemala, is soft spoken and has an intense gaze. Speaking in Tzutujil, the native language spoken in and around the village, he began explaining how the region’s communities got their names. Like all 26 children in the library that day, Carmelita was mesmerized.

“Tzanchaj means ‘place of the pines’,” Mr. Damian told the children. “Xechivoy means ‘place of onions’ and Tzanjuyu means ‘place where the volcano enters the lake’.”

Tzanchaj, and the villages around it, are agricultural communities set high above Guatemala’s Lake Atitlán. They are surrounded by volcanoes. They are also extremely poor, and literacy rates there are among the lowest in Latin America. This year, Child Aid is involving rural elders in a program that emphasizes the Mayan oral tradition while fostering writing skills among children. Mr. Damian is one of many elders who have visited Child Aid-supported libraries to share indigenous legends. The children who attend these sessions do writing exercises based on the stories they hear. The idea is to encourage children’s sense of pride in their native languages, foster respect for local elders and help keep Mayan traditions alive, all while developing basic writing skills.

When Mr. Damian finished his chat, Carmelita and her classmates pulled out their stapled-together paper notebooks and began writing about the stories they heard.

“Most of the writing kids do in rural schools here is rote copying,” explained John van Keppel, Child Aid’s Guatemala Program Director. “By having them process and describe what they hear, we help them develop key comprehension and critical thinking skills.”

In Guatemala, where the ability to read can mean the difference between a life of poverty and earning a living wage, these skills are crucial.

Inside a Child Aid-supported library, Andres Sosof Damian shares indigenous legends in his native Mayan language of Tzutujil.
Child Aid Launches Girls Initiative

Working alongside teachers in rural classrooms, our literacy trainers know the educational challenges Mayan girls face. They see that girls are less likely than boys to participate in classroom discussions, are rarely willing to express opinions, and seldom present themselves as group leaders. While we strive for equal participation in our classroom reading activities, we rarely see it.

To bring girls to the forefront of our literacy program and give them the attention they need, Child Aid is partnering with the World Population Council (WPC) to reach this vulnerable group in a new way. This November, we will begin work through a growing network of rural WPC Girls Clubs to provide reading workshops and activities for 350 girls between eight and 17 years old.

Through this pilot program, we hope to increase girls’ reading skills and lay a foundation for improved academic performance and greater confidence in school. The more avenues we take in the fight against illiteracy, the better – especially for those who need it most.

Books Go Mobile to Reach Remote Village

A year ago, if you took a bus out to the indigenous village of Godinez, high above Guatemala’s Lake Atitlán, you’d have found an elementary school that looked, from the outside, like a decent school in a rural setting. The wooden buildings are soundly constructed, arts and crafts adorn the walls inside, and school desks fill all seven of the classrooms.

Upon closer inspection, you would have noticed something else: No books.

Most schools in rural Guatemala lack books. Very few are printed within the country, schools have no funds to purchase them, and libraries are rare. This absence of reading material is a major reason Guatemala has the lowest literacy rate in Latin America.

In 2010, we launched our Books to Villages program in the town of Santa Lucía Utatlán to address this problem. Through the program, rotating boxes of children’s books are delivered by car, motorcycle or truck to our remotest partner communities. They are then distributed to classrooms while teachers learn to create lending and reading programs for their students.

This year, Child Aid brought Books to Villages to seven additional communities, including Godinez. More than 850 children in these remote villages now have access to storybooks for the first time in their lives.

“As soon as the kids put their hands on the books, they fall in love with reading,” says Richard Carroll, Child Aid’s co-founder. “It opens a whole new world for them, and the possibility of a different future.” We believe that books, coupled with an effective literacy program, are the best way to help Guatemala’s poorest children learn to read.
STUDENT PROFILE

Scholarship Paves Girl’s Path to College

Without the scholarships provided through Child Aid’s Ethical Bean Scholarship Fund, Merlin Xicón may never have completed grade school. She could have ended up like so many girls do in Guatemala: unable to read, pregnant at an early age and struggling to put food on the table. Instead, she’s going to college.

Child Aid provided scholarships to Merlin for 12 years, allowing her to attend preschool, primary school and junior high. She graduated from vocational school last year and this year began studying at the university. Child Aid’s partner preschool in El Téjar hired her as a teacher’s aide so she could work while studying and afford the cost of college.

Merlin Xicón (center) could not have gone to school without Child Aid scholarships. Now she is studying at the University of San Carlos in Guatemala and will soon be the first in her family to get a college degree.

How You Can Help

• Donate to Child Aid by mail or online at www.child-aid.org.
• Tell a friend! We need to expand our circle of support.
• Become a fan on Facebook at www.facebook.com/childaidliteracy and invite your friends.
• Hold a fundraiser such as a read-a-thon, garage sale or special event. (Call us for materials and support.)

LETTER FROM THE DIRECTOR

The Villages Along the Way

During my trips to Guatemala, I spend long hours traveling with our literacy staff to the villages where Child Aid works. This is my chance to see the progress of Reading for Life and to speak with our partners on the ground.

These trips invigorate my work. But the drives often leave me unsettled. As we bounce down endless, unimproved roads, we pass scores of other villages with schools that are no better – and sometimes worse – than those where we work. Just like our partner communities, these places have classrooms devoid of reading materials. They have teachers with nowhere to get basic training. Saddest of all, they are home to children in poverty who have almost no chance at a quality education – children who may never learn to read.

I can tell you that Guatemala has the lowest literacy rate in Latin America. But it would mean so much more if I could show you the nine-year-old carrying a giant stack of wood on his back when he should be in school. Or introduce you to the mother who wanted to be a teacher but was pulled out of school before she learned to read.

What can we do about those neglected villages and schools? Our only hope is to continue expanding Reading for Life so more children in more communities can participate. Next year we are bringing the program to six additional villages. All told, 47 communities will be partnering with us to fight childhood illiteracy. It’s a start, but there is much more we can do.

As we embark on our annual fundraising drive this fall, we will need your help to carry out this vital work. The need may be infinite, but the time we have to help a child learn to read is unquestionably finite.

Thank you for all your support!

My warmest regards,

Sam Hendricks,
Executive Director
Empowering Families Affected by Deafness

In southern Mexico, children with hearing impairments have few if any resources to help them lead normal lives. These children often become ostracized from their communities and face lives of isolation and discrimination.

This year, CORAL, the hearing program Child Aid established in Oaxaca, launched a unique initiative to provide additional resources and education to impoverished families affected by deafness. Through the program, CORAL health workers travel to remote towns to help families create their own advocacy and support groups. CORAL staff provide training to family members and help them learn the legal rights they and their children have, especially in school.

CORAL continues to provide hearing aids, therapy, testing and/or diagnosis to over 2,000 children every year. These services form the core of our hearing program. But, by creating additional support initiatives for remote families, we extend the impact of our work beyond the doors of our Oaxaca clinic. As a result, we help improve the lives of some of Mexico’s most vulnerable children in one of the poorest areas of the country.

Right: In the remote town of San Pablo Coatlán, Oaxaca, a child receives an early detection screening test for hearing impairments.

Investing in Librarians

Child Aid helps communities create and staff local libraries, but many of those communities lack resources to pay a full time librarian. To help impoverished communities afford this cost, Child Aid pays half salaries for several librarians on the condition that each community raises and pays the other half. This encourages local investment in the librarian and the library, and helps ensure the sustainability of both. These librarians then work as reading promoters in their community. Working with our literacy staff, they engage children in reading programs in the library, establish book-lending programs and visit local classrooms to conduct story hours and assist teachers.

Currently, we provide salary support for librarians in four remote communities. If you or your community would like to cover the cost of employing a librarian in Guatemala please contact our office.

Above: Juana Sissay Gomez is a Child Aid trained librarian in the village of Tzanchaj, Guatemala. She is one of several indigenous librarians whose salaries are supported by Child Aid contributors.
Scholarship Update

Thirteen years ago, the young woman pictured on page three of this newsletter graduated from CEDIN, Child Aid’s partner preschool in El Tejar, Guatemala. For the next nine years she received Child Aid scholarships through FUNDIT, the preschool’s parent organization. Currently, 107 children attend the preschool on Child Aid scholarships, and we are helping an additional 105 CEDIN graduates continue their schooling through our Ethical Bean Scholarship Fund.

Volunteers from around the world regularly work at CEDIN as teachers’ aides. If you are interested in volunteering at CEDIN, or would like to make a contribution in support of the program, please call Child Aid’s Portland office.

Below: Working with its local partner, Child Aid provides uniforms, scholarships, school supplies and nutritional lunches for each of these children in El Tejar, Guatemala.

Child Aid & Volunteers Repair Schools & Libraries

Although Child Aid focuses on people-to-people projects rather than bricks and mortar work, we do conduct physical improvements to some the most neglected schools and libraries in our program. This November, Child Aid volunteers will work alongside community members in the village of Godinez, where they will improve a school and build bookshelves to distribute throughout the region. In the town of Chimaltenango, Child Aid has invested thousands of dollars to build classrooms, paint and repair a dilapidated school, create a library and replace leaky roofs. And, last year, Child Aid volunteers put in numerous hours painting a rundown primary school in the indigenous village of Agua Escondida.

This hands-on work is not only critical for the survival of our partner schools and libraries, but a great way to increase community involvement in our work.
I N B R I E F

Six Villages Join Reading for Life

Next year, Child Aid will expand its Reading for Life literacy program to serve six new communities in the Guatemalan highlands. Working with these villages will allow us to provide regular, year-round reading activities to over 1200 additional Mayan children in the region.

New Books Reach New Readers

This year, Child Aid shipped 37,900 Spanish-language children’s books to Guatemala. With support from our partner communities, we are distributing them to libraries and schools in over 50 villages. The books were donated by International Book Bank and International Book Program. Shipping and distribution was made possible by Vitol Charitable Foundation and Child Aid donors.

What We Do

Child Aid works with indigenous people in some of Latin America's poorest communities to create opportunity and alleviate poverty. We deliver thousands of books to rural Guatemalan schools and libraries and offer scholarships to children who need them most. We provide extensive training for teachers and librarians and bring reading programs into the lives of thousands of poor children. We also provide therapy, support and schooling for deaf and hard of hearing children in one of Mexico's poorest regions.

Each year, over 15,000 children in Guatemala gain access to books, thanks to Child Aid shipments.

Antonia Mas Ixtos, a Child Aid-trained librarian in Guatemala, with two young Reading for Life participants.