



El Maestro en Casa, Inc.
ADULT OUTREACH EDUCATION
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Dear Friends and Generous Supporters,

As I spend another glorious summer with my grandkids here in Brandon, Vermont, as always I am awed by the abundance of options that surround them. Our community offers them an assortment of activities, classes, and sports teams that can keep them occupied the entire summer if they wish it. And my grandkids actually look forward to the school year, thanks to the wonderful, creative and dedicated teachers they've had since they began in the local school when they were just three. Arlo, who just turned 2, still doesn't talk much (although he communicates beautifully) so he's already had several home visits from Integrated Child Services and the speech therapist—all for free.

While I am eternally grateful that my grandchildren have so many advantages because they are Americans, and Vermonters, I am also very sad that such basic services are not available to children everywhere. In Honduras, frequent teacher strikes and poor quality instruction have reduced the education system to one of the poorest in Latin America. In the isolated mountain villages where we work, extreme poverty and teacher absenteeism compound the problems, and we find we need to spend more time each year teaching our new students how to study—and how to learn—so that we can gradually try to bring them up to grade level.



2nd generation students



Experimenting with electric current

On the brighter side, since we've now been around for over 15 years, many of our former students are now actively participating in their own children's education, demanding more from the public school system, and sending their children to our program for middle school and high school, since these grades are still not available in most rural communities. These young people often become our most successful students, not necessarily because they are brighter, but because they have the distinct and invaluable advantage of having well-educated parents who recognize the importance of quality education, and insist that

their children receive nothing less. This is, of course, exactly what we want for our own children, and we watch those kids whose parents are not so involved, struggle in the classroom. But imagine the even greater challenges kids must face when their parents and other family members are illiterate. So, yes, we are making a difference, because the young people we are struggling to educate today will have better educated children tomorrow. Our progress may be slow and difficult to quantify, but it's definitely there, and that's enough to keep us plugging away.

We also maintain a perhaps Pollyanna optimism that the government will one day get its act together and truly reform education. Well, there are "reforms" each year, but all they seem to generate is more paperwork

instead of real improvement. This year, however, the national government has conceded that it has not done an adequate job and Congress passed the “Law to Strengthen Public Education and Community Participation in Honduras”, which essentially decentralizes the administration of the education system, putting it in the hands of municipal councils made up of parents, teachers, students, community and religious leaders and NGOs. This sounds a lot like our school boards, and most certainly was patterned on our system. The problem, of course, is that Honduras is not the United States. For example, in San Francisco de Opalaca, one of the more remote areas where we work, the mayor has a 4th grade education, most of the parents are illiterate, many public school students are functionally illiterate, and the teachers and community leaders are strongly influenced by political parties. Throw endemic corruption into the pot and it’s difficult to believe that education will be better served by such councils. On the other hand, it does open up the possibility that some of our students could serve on a council, and our program could exert some influence on local education. That’s a possibility I find very exciting, but of course only time will tell.



Some of our students in San Francisco de Opalaca

Our 2011 school year began optimistically, as usual, and also a little late, as usual, because we always need to



Armando's 7th grade class

wait for some of our students to return from coffee harvesting. We registered 430 students this year, down a bit from 460 last year, but better than we expected given the worsening economic situation in Honduras. The new student group in San Isidro grew to more than 40, and we split it into two groups. Now Bertha, our administrator, goes out on the back of our more reliable motorcycle with Armando to attend the group. But first we had the requisite inauguration, with representatives of the mayor’s office, World Vision, Bertha, Armando and yours truly seated at the head table in the church in the center of the village. After many speeches, music and dance presentations by the students (both traditional and VERY modern—

this is a very young group), the food finally arrived, but only for the head table, so the whole community watched us eat before we were able to start the 2-hour trek back down the mountain, at sunset. You might remember that this is our first student group to receive support from a municipal government and World Vision, so we’re monitoring it very closely with the hope that it will serve as a model to other municipalities where we have groups, and perhaps we’ll receive more support. We’ve sent letters to the other mayors, signed by the local Deputy (congressman), but we’ve had no response. I think the Deputy needs to speak

personally with the mayors before we see any action, and I doubt that will happen soon—or at all. It was the Deputy’s wife who got us the signatures, but she’s since faded from the landscape. So much for our foray into Honduran politics.



Participants practice with condoms

In March we held another maternal health workshop, this time with the collaboration of two JICA volunteers: a midwife and a public health nurse. JICA is a Japanese volunteer organization very similar to our Peace Corps. Although the two women were assigned to other parts of the country, they got permission to come to La Esperanza for our workshop and completely awed us with their materials, which they spent

several late nights drawing and painting. They left us all these incredible works of art which we’ll not only use

in future workshops, but also in our high school science classes when we discuss human reproduction. The workshop participants this time ranged from young students to considerably older volunteer health workers, and pregnant women from sixteen to forty-two. The discussions were lively and filled with traditional customs and beliefs—some more credible than others. One woman, pregnant with her 5th child, cried when she heard her baby's heartbeat. She had



Participant simulates pregnancy

never heard her other children's heartbeats and this was the first time she knew for certain that this baby was alive. Imagine going through an entire pregnancy without being certain until delivery if your baby was alive! And this was her 5th! This is why the primary objective of the workshop is to empower women to actively participate in their reproductive life, which includes, of course, asking the right questions and demanding the answers, no easy task when both Lenca culture



Hearing her baby's heartbeat for the first time

and the traditional education system encourage passive acceptance, especially among women.

Once again we are very fortunate to have the support of Peace Corps volunteers, this time a terrific young couple who are giving our high school math and chemistry classes. This is invaluable help to us, not just because they provide a bit of relief to my very overworked teachers, but they also update our curriculum and help keep us more current on information, technology and teaching methods.



Determining level of organic material in the soil

Unfortunately, apparently Peace Corps is reducing its activities in La Esperanza, since it has been there longer than it has in other areas of the country. So we most likely won't be getting a volunteer assigned to us as we had hoped, which is disappointing. In order to continue improving our outreach while maintaining our standards, we really need another body. I have the perfect candidate, but he needs a salary, so I've added another \$8,000 to my wish list.



Raised beds for organic vegetables

We still have plenty of projects just waiting for volunteers or donations. We'd like to build another greenhouse on the roof over the classrooms, but first we need to repair the roof, since it leaks during the rainy season. Also, the entire inside open space in our center remains unfinished, so instead of the long dreamed about basketball/volleyball court, we have a puddle-filled mess. And of course we can always use advice on our organic vegetable garden out back and our strawberries on the roof—and the list goes on. We definitely have something for everyone, so tell us your talent and

we'll tell you the project. I'll be in Vermont until the end of August, so give me a call or email me.

As always, my profound thanks—we couldn't run our program without you.

Susan