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By Carol A. Erickson

Report on Guatemala and Honduras libraries

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The homicide rate in Honduras is among the highest in the world. Decades of corruption have gnawed through government and police forces from top to bottom. Trafficking of cocaine and drugs—destined north to Mexico and the United States—is rampant, as is underemployment throughout the country. And as in any culture, Honduran children are especially susceptible to the risky lifestyles that surround them.

“Honduran libraries are working to get kids off the street,” said Dagoberto Licon Cortés, the mayor of San Vicente Centenario. “We want to see kids more interested in acting on behalf of their communities and less interested in drugs and alcohol. Young children and teens can change their way of thinking when they have access to leadership programs at libraries.”

Cortés is not referring to government-managed public libraries, but rather a network of 64 independent community libraries in remote villages of Honduras and Guatemala, where many people live on less than \$2 a day. For the past dozen years, these libraries, which were established by the Frances and Henry Riecken

Foundation, have fostered a movement of democracy, transparency, and citizen participation as an alternative to the often chaotic and lawless reality that reigns throughout the region. It is a movement that has seen good times, and now, during a period of severe financial challenge, is redefining itself in order to emerge from several difficult years.

The foundation came about thanks to Allen Andersson, a wealthy American businessman, and his wife Susan Riecken. During a two-year Peace Corps assignment in Honduras in the mid-1960s, Andersson learned that the nation's rural residents needed basics: food, medicine, schools, fertilizer, honest government, good jobs, and more. But for Andersson, giving rural villagers access to information so they could play a key role in their own community development was a more empowering strategy to help alleviate poverty.

Andersson went on to become a multimillionaire, and along with Riecken decided to commit more than \$10 million of their fortune to build and manage community libraries in Central America. In 2000, Andersson founded the Frances and Henry Riecken Foundation, a private organization that built the network of 64 Riecken Community Libraries. They recruited local volunteer library board members and trained staff members in a way that vastly differed from that of traditional government-run public libraries in Central America.

Riecken Community Libraries have been promoting open stacks that allow patrons to browse books and take them home (in contrast to the traditional Central American-style of "protecting" collections from patrons by keeping them in areas accessible only to library staff). Riecken libraries have also developed programs and outreach initiatives to encourage a love of reading, as well as critical thinking and leadership skills in a culture where rote memorization is the norm.

In an effort to promote financial transparency, many of the libraries' boards publicly post their monthly financial information to encourage government transparency elsewhere. Riecken libraries also host book clubs; infant nutrition programs for new mothers; and programs to reach farmers, aspiring entrepreneurs, and indigenous girls, who are often denied access to formal education.

Andersson paid for every bit of the libraries' funding from his own pocket, which averaged more than \$500,000 dollars per year. Then, in 2008, he lost everything.

Having gone bankrupt due to the global economic crisis, Andersson was mainly concerned with how to keep the libraries operating. He desperately scrambled to turn his sole-donor-funded model into one that had a more diverse base of supporters, initiated the process of changing the private foundation's status to that of a nonprofit, and requested support from local municipal governments in Guatemala and Honduras. At one point during the peak of the financial crisis, the foundation's president and chief executive officer, William Cartwright, an experienced human rights lawyer, was forced to schedule a rapid, one-month closing of Riecken's offices and curtailment of resources, virtually leaving the libraries to their own devices."

"We'll never go back to that model again," said Cartwright. "Riecken will continue to build libraries, but it will be with greater contributions from communities."

Once accustomed to receiving their salaries, operating expenses, programming, and book funds from a single wealthy American donor, Riecken libraries that were not supported by local residents could have easily closed. Instead, every one of the 64 libraries is still operating, and they are now working to strengthen themselves and their budgets through advocacy, networking, and training.

Agreements with local governments now include provisions to pay staff salaries and building utilities. Still, entrenched government corruption sometimes manifests itself. Municipalities sometimes try to keep the libraries' intended funds for themselves, which means that roughly 25% of the libraries are in a constant struggle to get needed monies, and some staff members work for months without salaries.

At a November 2012 three-day meeting of the Riecken Community Libraries network—or Asociacion Red de Bibliotecas Comunitarias Riecken(ARBICOR)—in San Pedro Sula, Honduras, library representatives elected ARBICOR's governing board and began defining priorities and developing a strategy to strengthen the network.

“A local government that doesn't support education is supporting the death of its community,” said José León Arrazola of the Cedros library in Honduras.

Library officials here know that advocacy efforts have to be carefully crafted to navigate the political realities of a corrupt and sometimes punitive government system that could undermine efforts to strengthen their services. While ARBICOR has to be cognizant of these realities, its members strive to model democracy through freely elected boards, transparent finances, and services that are open and available to everyone. The efforts of the Riecken Community Libraries were rewarded with a 2012 American Library Association Presidential Citation for Innovative International Library Projects.

“People will do for themselves if there is more democracy and local empowerment,” said Andersson. “Riecken's libraries are working to bring power to the people by building strong communities that work toward the public good. They are nonpartisan but deeply democratic institutions.”

Many residents of the rural Guatemalan and Honduran communities in which Riecken libraries operate are searching for better sanitation, enhanced agricultural methods, improved standards of living, and access to reliable information and education for themselves and their children. As flexible, trusted institutions, Riecken libraries work with residents to solve community problems, forming a natural partnership for a wide range of development projects.

Local and national governments in Central America need to recognize that support for libraries has already yielded substantial community development and that further investment can truly become a significant way for a service-oriented democratic government to respond to its peoples' local needs.

Riecken Community Libraries was a recipient of the 2012 American Library Association Presidential Citation for Innovative International Library Projects. riecken.org [4]

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