

Reicken Community Libraries

Inspiring volunteerism and activism in Central America

by William Cartwright

Over the past dozen years, nearly 30 Peace Corps Volunteers have contributed to developing a distinctive network of 64 rural community libraries in Guatemala and Honduras. The seed for that idea—the concept of libraries as tools for community development—was planted in the consciousness of a calculus-teaching Peace Corps Volunteer, Allen Andersson, more than 40 years ago.

From 1966 to 1968, Andersson taught at the National University of Honduras; yet on trips outside the capital, Tegucigalpa, he learned about the true needs of people in remote villages: food, medicine, schools, fertilizer, honest government and good jobs. Andersson began to understand the critical importance of widespread access to information in the social change process.

In 2000 Andersson founded the nonprofit Riecken Community Libraries with money he had earned from a career in telecommunications, computational linguistics and radiology. During his 1960s Peace Corps days, Andersson developed a strong belief that local empowerment and robust democracy could bring “power to the people” which, in turn, would build strong communities that would work for the public good. Local residents, if given access to information and a voice in the creation of local development activities, could improve their standard of living, address local needs and demand government transparency.

The Riecken network is now spurring a grassroots movement that puts community volunteerism at its center, encouraging social participation and proactive citizenship.

Raul Nunez is one of the Peace Corps Volunteers who played a role in



All Photos: Riecken Foundation

Riecken reading promotors travel to a rural community.

developing the Riecken Community Library network during his 2006–08 assignment in the small village of Namasigue, Honduras.

“As a municipal development Volunteer, Namasigue’s mayor asked me if I had heard of an organization called Riecken. They were encouraging communities to submit proposals to build a local library,” said Nunez. “The mayor asked me to learn more about them and ultimately, to play a facilitator role in submitting an application.”

Riecken staff met Nunez and the Namasigue community to discuss the project. They emphasized that Riecken’s model is rooted in a philosophy that promotes free and open access to essential knowledge, and a commitment to lifelong learning. Each library had to be managed by volunteer community leaders, who would not only oversee it, but also build an institution with strong local governance drawn from all community sectors. In Riecken’s

experience, this approach is the best assurance that the library becomes a place where, in addition to free access to information and activities, people feel welcome and comfortable convening.

“One of the things I immediately noticed in the village was that there was no community center,” said Nunez. “There was one soccer field, but no place for people to gather for intellectual activity. There were few really active community members. But Riecken’s work in the community changed that.”

“I remember being impressed by how the people came together to fulfill Riecken’s proposal requirements, and how hard both the community and Riecken staff worked. Riecken wanted the library located in a place where it would be utilized, so the library board and mayor proposed building it right next to the middle and high school.”

The one-room Camino Hacia el Exito Library was inaugurated on August 1, 2007. Many residents contributed



Street scene in Copan, Honduras.

labor for construction, while others donated materials. The end result was a collection of books, never before seen by the children in such numbers, and open access to computers and the Internet. Teachers had a place to assign children to conduct research; youth and women had a meeting space; and students could nurture and create reading habits and critical thinking skills.

“Many well-intentioned developing world projects waste a lot of money,” said Nunez. “What I witnessed was how Riecken differentiated itself by the intensive training they provided to library staff and volunteers, and the requirement for active community involvement in the library’s planning and management.

“In 2011 I went back to Namasigue, and saw that the community had added another big room to the library. A board member and teacher talked about the library’s critical contribution to the students’ research and after-school activities. Riecken spent an unbelievable amount of time on volunteer library board training, and that really made the difference.”

Nearly half of Riecken’s libraries have benefited from a Peace Corps Volunteer’s contribution to their development, programming and/or fundraising. With their



Library computer users in Chiche, Guatemala.



Riecken Library patron.

help, the network has grown and stands in direct contrast to traditional Central American public libraries, which have closed book stacks, and little to no relevant programming, activities, or technology.

Instead, Riecken’s volunteer boards oversee libraries with high demand and usage, strong programming to respond to community needs, open book stacks, Internet access and user borrowing privileges. They host book clubs, infant nutrition programs for new mothers, youth environmental clubs, electoral candidate debates, and programs to reach farmers, aspiring entrepreneurs, and indigenous girls, who are often denied access to education.

Riecken’s libraries foster a movement of democracy, transparency and citizen participation. The libraries strive to be models of democracy with freely elected boards, transparent finances, and services open to all. Many libraries even publicly post their monthly financial information to encourage government transparency elsewhere.

“I feel so lucky to have been in Namasigue, seeing the library go from an idea, to construction, to enthusiastic use by teachers, students, and community members,” said Núñez. “Being able to

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return and see the library's contribution to the community reaffirms that my time as a Peace Corps Volunteer made a difference."

At their core, Riecken Community Libraries give local villagers a chance to play a key role in their own destiny, making sure that books, programs, outreach and activities are tailored to community needs. The fact that so many Peace Corps Volunteers have contributed and continue to contribute to the development of local volunteerism in Central America is a legacy not only of Riecken's founder, Allen Andersson, but also a tangible measure of the Peace Corps's enduring impact around the globe.

I understand that everybody wants a

face and a hero, but that really isn't what the Peace Corps (or its afterwork) should be about ... The real heroes [are] the townspeople who have – in 64 out of 64 communities!! – sustained their libraries even after outside support disappeared. Also the youngsters who fill every library every day with an ebullient spirit of discovery...

William Cartwright (Costa Rica 1987–89) is the president and CEO of Riecken Community Libraries. You can learn more about the Riecken Libraries at www.riecken.org.

Kids being measured as part of a nutrition program.



Long Division

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brother. João Domingos was nine, he lived with an aunt half a mile down the hill. Gurete saw him on Sundays. Djudjé was seven and Suraia six. They could pass for twins, both miniature versions of their mother. Thick braids sprouting from their heads; arms and legs always covered in a thin film of dust.

The children's father lived in Portugal. He left before Suraia was a bulge in Gurete's belly. She would count on her fingers the months since he'd sent a check. When money does come, she'd say wryly, *ta kumpra midju pa galinha*—it buys corn for the chickens.

Usually her concentration was fierce, for at least fifteen minutes, before a neighbor leaned in the window to pay a visit or she remembered that she left the pot on the fire, or her mother came in to tell her to put the books away, to come help shell beans. But tonight I could tell she was distracted by something else. The numbers kept evading her, hovering like the dust that wouldn't stay swept.

"*N sta pensa na ba Merka*," she told me, a bit sheepishly, looking up at me for approval. I'm thinking about going to America. "Just for a few years," she said.

Her voice grew distant, as though she could picture it. "Save some money... My cousin Isildo says there's work for me in Brockton, in the factory. He says I could stay with his family there." Her pencil traced curlicues on the paper. She lay the words down like a carefully worked answer, waiting for my verdict.

The smell of kerosene sharpened on the rough-edged silence. I felt it in my sinuses, a suffocating headache. With my college education, I could explain the basic math Gurete was learning, but not the equations that really mattered: how was it I found myself thousands of miles from my comfortable suburban upbringing, on this remote speck in the Atlantic? How was it Gurete, who'd lived her whole life on this ribeira, and dreamed of something else, couldn't leave?

And how did Gurete imagine America? Probably not the tumbledown tenements outside Boston, windowless factories, cold cracking like mean jokes in a language she couldn't understand. Her math skills could not calculate the long hours, months multiplying into years, how a paycheck reduces itself into smaller and smaller fractions: rent, food, bus rides, things you hadn't counted on.

She put the pencil down. "Of course I'd have to get a visa first," she sighed.

We've both seen the lines at the American Embassy in Praia, trailing out the door like a long remainder. We both know the tiny percentage that gets in, of those the smaller fraction that get the coveted piece of paper. We both knew that at thirty she was past her prime, that the consul would see no currency in her waist thickened from childbirth, her breasts already beginning to sag.

"*Ja tchiga*," she said, closing her notebook, shouldering her school bag. That's enough. I watched her walk the few meters up the hill to her house, where she would fall into bed, wrap her body around the small sum of Suraia's limbs. "Nha kodé," she'd whisper, the name for the last loved child, the caboose.

*Eleanor Stanford served in Cape Verde from 1998 to 2000. Her memoir about the experience, *Historia, Historia: Two Years in the Cape Verde Islands* was published in 2013 by the Chicago Center for Literature and Photography. Her first book, *The Book of Sleep*, was published in 2008 by Carnegie Mellon Press, and her poems and essays have appeared in *Poetry*, *Ploughshares*, *Harvard Review*, *The Massachusetts Review*, and many other journals. She currently lives in the Philadelphia area and teaches at St. Joseph's University.*