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sotto voce — Reading Hope into the Actions of One Individual

by **Bob Schatz** (Manager of North American Sales, Everetts)
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fields of Guatemala, he instead became a teacher. But his story doesn't end there.

Rigoberto Charuc is not a wealthy man, yet he has dedicated his life in a unique way to making Guatemala a better place to live. While it would be natural to assume that Charuc is working to build more schools and bring more education to his country, his work, instead, centers on the creation of new libraries. Seven years ago he founded **PROBIGUA: The Library Project of Guatemala**, whose motto is **Changing Guatemala One Book At A Time**.

Guatemala is a place that can use some change. It is one of this hemisphere's poorest countries. Half the population cannot read. That number is closer to ninety percent in rural areas. One-third of the population never even begins schooling of any kind, and more than another third drop out before completing high school. Fewer than two-percent of Guatemalans make it to a university, and fewer still obtain their degree.

Amidst this bleak picture, Charuc's foundation has been quietly building libraries in parts of Guatemala far from the metropolis of Guatemala City. To date, eight libraries have been built in areas that previously had no access to books of any kind. Additionally, an old school bus has been converted to a bookmobile, which makes weekly rounds of ten rural schools. In those places where **The Library Project** has built libraries, more children are starting school and fewer are dropping out, reinforcing the idea

that libraries help overcome illiteracy in many ways.

To maintain a flow of funds, **PROBIGUA** maintains an in-country, Spanish-language immersion program, mainly for Americans. Proceeds after expenses are devoted to the building of libraries. The organization has set a goal of opening ten new libraries every five years, and adding to the stock of existing project libraries. The first **PROBIGUA** library, opened in 1992, started with just 75 books. Today that library has over 1000 volumes available to local villagers. While this is tiny by American standards, these libraries represent a wealth of knowledge to communities that have never had books available to them.

In recent years, Charuc's organization has teamed up with SoundAid, a Portland-based charitable agency. In 1996, **SoundAid** worked with **PROBIGUA** to distribute more than 60,000 new, Spanish language textbooks in a variety of subjects. Charuc hopes to find other organizations to partner with in the coming years.

It is heartening to see how one man of modest means has set out to make the world a better place. At a time when so many people worry that a meaningful role for libraries in modern culture will disappear, **Rigoberto Zamora Charuc's** work brings a message of hope to the profession. He could have focused his attentions on any number of other worthy causes that would have benefited his impoverished country: healthcare, hunger, economic opportunity. The fact that he chose books and libraries should remind all of us that libraries and librarians do, indeed, make a difference.

Thanks to **Osker Spicer** of the *Oregonian* for providing some of the background information about Rigoberto Charuc and **PROBIGUA**. Those wishing to find out more about Charuc's work can log onto to: <http://PROBIGUA.conexion.com/morlibinfo.htm>

Everyone wants to make a difference--librarians perhaps more than some others, since no one goes into librarianship for the wealth or power it is likely to bring. There are varying degrees, though, of making the world a better place. Some of us try to accomplish this by giving an honest day's work for an honest day's pay and raising our kids to be moral, upstanding citizens. Some people go to greater lengths.

One such person is a man named **Rigoberto Zamora Charuc**, a Guatemalan of Mayan descent. In a country where it is rare to rise above the circumstances of one's birth, Charuc, at fourteen, was given a scholarship to attend a Catholic school, and later, college. It changed his life. Where he was once destined to work for a lifetime in the coffee

Did you know?

While university presses publish few textbooks, they do publish many scholarly books that are appropriate for classroom application.