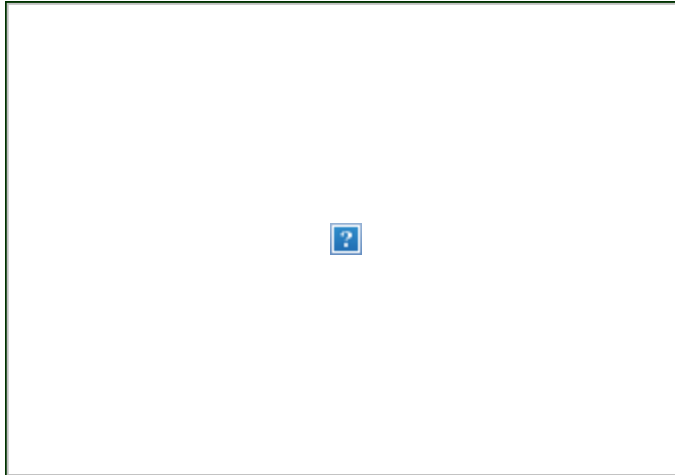


Victorino's Story – Part 2

The Road to Certification



A group of teachers at the Ngabe-Bugle Cultural Centre in Soloy

AUGUST 6, 2003

CHIRIQUI PROVINCE, PANAMA

The sweet smell of cedar sawdust fills the air, and the rhythmic back-and-forth of a lone hacksaw harmonizes with an insistent tap-tap-tapping of oversized tropical raindrops announcing an imminent downpour. Suddenly, all clouds burst, and the entire sky becomes a waterfall, its deafening beat thundering off the corrugated tin roof of the Ngabe-Bugle Cultural Centre in Soloy.

Sra Májxima is inside preparing yet another meal of rice and lentils, while Victorino Rodriguez is hard at work, along with fifteen other indigenous schoolteachers. They labour in silence, oblivious to the rain, preparing instructional materials to take back to their schools. One is on government salary; the rest are volunteers, serving full-time as teachers for the native children who live in the remote mountain communities of Chiriqui.

The teachers are attending an intensive two-week training, where they will earn three credits towards the fourteen required to become government-certified and receive a salary. Roberto Palacio has been serving as a volunteer for eleven years. His wife, Maria Teresa Bejerano, also a teacher, is participating in the workshop as well. Their three small children are visiting this afternoon. All of the teachers have worked long years under harsh conditions and at great personal sacrifice. This course represents a significant step towards their goals.

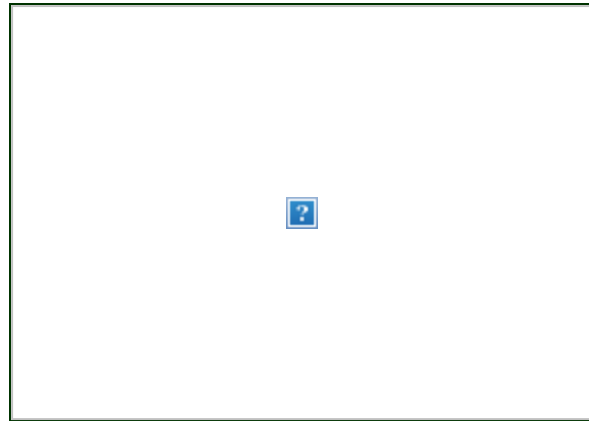
The training is sponsored by the Mona Foundation (a non-profit based organisation in the United States), and includes classes in Curriculum Development, Lesson Planning, Teaching Strategies for Active Learning, Basic Health and Hygiene, Methods of Teaching Elementary Maths, and the production of handson materials.

Most of the teachers are members of the Bahá'í Faith, who have arisen in service to others, without regard to race, religion, gender or economic status, and without thought of personal gain, in accordance with the principles of their Faith. They are learning to set instructional goals that meet Ministry of Education requirements, and that are in harmony with Bahá'í teachings as well as local cultural values. They have generated a list of topics which they feel are of high importance to their people:

- moral values and good character
- practical skills for useful work
- sustainable agricultural techniques
- technology in service of social, economic and spiritual development

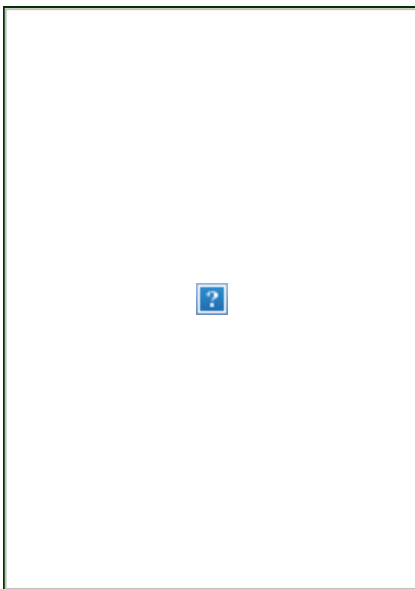
- combining the best of traditional and modern medicine
- health and hygiene, with an emphasis on childhood illnesses
- development of native handicrafts as a local industry
- preservation of traditional culture, including songs, dances and games
- evaluation of modern culture using spiritual principles as a guide.

After setting goals, the teachers practice writing educational objectives using an integrated thematic approach. They work in teams to design interesting lessons based on those objectives, and they demonstrate a variety of teaching strategies, including the use of art, music and drama. While the training is in Spanish, some of the more difficult concepts are translated into Ngabere, the local indigenous language, to facilitate understanding. A step-by-step approach with plenty of encouragement and constructive feedback, soon has the teachers eager to test new lessons and materials on each other.



Tahirih Sanches displays her work

In the maths workshop each afternoon, participants take turns using the hacksaw, the drill, and other tools which have been brought by the trainers, and which will remain at the Bahá'í Institute there. The teachers are crafting practical materials that will help their students learn to sort, classify, count, understand the decimal system, and perform basic maths operations. These items must be produced using hand tools, since there is no electricity in the area. They must also be inexpensive and easy to make using local materials. (It is amazing what can be created with recycled cans, old milk cartons, clothes-pegs and contact paper.) In addition, the materials must be durable enough to survive the bugs, mud, rain and all-consuming humidity of the Panamanian jungle.



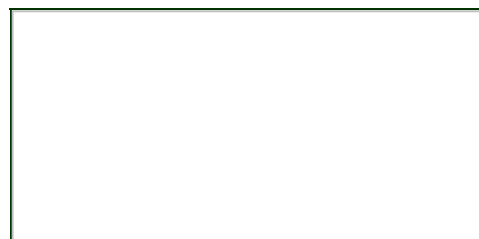
For most of the teachers, it is the first time they have used these tools. Spray paint is a novelty, and one person uses the entire can. Even a ruler is foreign to some, and they need instruction in how to measure – starting from zero instead of one.

But the teachers are motivated and learn quickly. Hesitation gives way to confidence, and soon, even the women are using the large saw. It is an impressive sight: young Ngabe women in their colourful floor-length naguas (the traditional dress), cutting wood and measuring right angles with a T-square, a pencil tucked behind one ear. During a break, one teacher slips off to a corner to nurse her baby, then returns to cut more wood. She is making the short numerical rods used in the Montessori system of education.

Victorino Sanchez

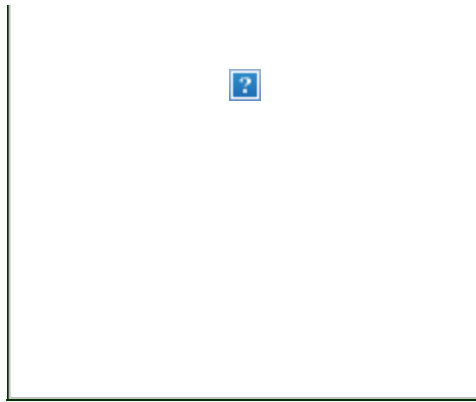
Despite the long hours of the workshop, the teachers' thirst for learning seems unquenchable, and they ask for classes on Saturday and in the evenings as well. Even dinner is regularly postponed while the late afternoon session is extended until dark. Májima worries that the rice is getting cold, but she is patient, and says nothing. She knows how long the teachers have waited for this opportunity.

After dinner, some of the teachers continue their work by candlelight. The night sky in Chiriqui fades to velvet black with a spray of glittering stars. The Milky Way lights a path to the dorms, and a cold shower feels good at the end of the day.

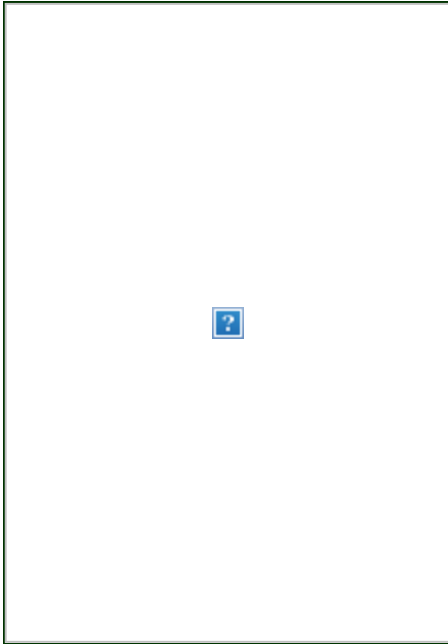


After two intensive weeks, the training course has

come to an end, and a photo session is scheduled for the last afternoon. The teachers are eager to display their wares, and to pose for individual portraits. It is touching to watch, as each one claims a table in the dining hall, and neatly sets out his or her hand-made creations, carefully arranging and rearranging every piece until the composition is perfect. One teacher asks for assistance as he has never had such a large number of possessions to organise. Before their photo is snapped, some of the teachers request plasters to cover blisters from using the saw. The artisans pose with great dignity and obvious pride, ignoring the enthusiastic cheers and goodnatured teasing of their colleagues. Many have not had their picture taken before.



Lineth Montezuma at work



Lineth cutting fabric squares

That night, a small closing ceremony is planned by the participants. It begins with prayers and singing in three languages (Spanish, English and Ngabere). There are eloquent speeches, a demonstration of maths materials, an exchange of gifts, laughter and a few tears. Finally, the name of each “graduate” is called, and one-by-one they come to the front to receive their gift – a teacher planning book with a small calculator attached.

“Why didn’t you just give us the calculator in the first place?” they joke. “Then we wouldn’t have had to struggle through this class!” Their official certificates are being signed by the Ministry of Education, and won’t be delivered for several days. But the teachers are not dismayed. They are already making plans for the next course.

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The Mona Foundation supports grassroots educational initiatives and works to raise the status of women and girls in the United States and abroad. If you would like to support these native schools, please contact the Mona Foundation:

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