

Dear Friends,

Before leaving the house I always pack a book just in case there is a lull time between my comings and goings. What I take for granted in reading words on a page, or signs on a highway, or even signing my name to a document isn't a 'given' for many women in Guatemala. Many, especially in rural areas, are illiterate – not because of choice necessarily, but because of cultural norms and economic hardships that shaped their lives when they were young and studying wasn't an option.

I realized this early on after I began working in Catholic women's groups. When I asked the women (most between the ages of forty and sixty) "Who can read?" the majority could not. One woman explained, "We weren't allowed to study. Only the boys were allowed to go to school. Our place was to help in the home with the cooking, cleaning, washing clothes and taking care of the younger children. Why would a girl need to read?"

That's the message they received by their fathers. What struck me then was how they felt about not being able to read now as adults. She went on to say, "We are nobodies. We can't read. We are blind to words..." My heart sank. I knew how the inability to read had impacted hers and others self-esteem and personal growth. I can't imagine life without a book.

But that has changed. I noticed this especially after the construction in the village of a junior high school that we funded in 2000 through a generous U.S. donor. The 'instituto basico' (junior high school) brought hope and the possibility of studying beyond the 6th grade. I started hearing girls in primary school say, "I'm not going to get married right away. I am going to study at the Instituto." And many of them did and are doing so now.



Vicenta and Angelica working hard

But what about my adult friends who can't read?

I brought the question up in a meeting with our teacher-library staff -Rolando, Bonifacio and Santos. I suggested we begin an adult literacy program in addition to the primary school reading and math reinforcement program they are doing three days a week. They were willing.

I began promoting this opportunity with the women in my circles. It is a hard sell. "I don't have time." "My husband won't allow me to study now." "I can no longer learn." The majority responded. But the few who did express an interest seemed to be because they wanted to sign their names on documents and also read the Bible. "Well, ask your husband for permission and see what happens!" I encouraged.

It isn't easy to learn anything new and can be daunting at first. We decided to reward the participants efforts with incentives of food - corn and beans - to help their families. And a Bible if they would get to that level of literacy.

To date, three brave souls have enrolled for the free classes that began in early December of 2022. They meet ideally three times per week for three hours when they can.

When I called from the U.S. and asked how the 'three' were doing, Santos said, "They are excited! They want more class

time! They are seeing results!" "Can they write their name yet?" I asked. "Not yet, but they are getting a handle on the letters of the alphabet and should soon be able to do that."

I wonder what being able to read will do for Vicenta, Angelica and Magdalena? How does it feel to have the symbols on the page begin to take shape and have meaning? What would it feel like to one day not only hear God's Word proclaimed from the pulpit at services and in prayer groups by others, but to be able to hold the sacred text in your hands and read the words for yourself where you are and when you want- to be encouraged, corrected, guided and fed spiritually? What does it feel like to no longer place your thumb on the black ink pad and imprint it on the blank page as your signature to instead write the letters of your name?

Empowerment, pride, joy?

Magdalena is thirty-nine years old. All of her four children are able to read and her youngest, eight-year old Maria, is just entering the first grade. Since school hasn't started yet (and not sure when it will) Maria is presently going with her mom and learning alongside her. I love this.

Time will tell how far these women will progress in their reading skills. But even in their attempt I hope they are growing and feeling a sense of pride and accomplishment. And maybe one day packed in their woven *morral* (a purse they carry) will be a book or a Bible.

Thank you for your prayers and support of Ixcán Ministries allowing us to do what we do. We hold you in prayer and heartfelt gratitude.

May God bless you and yours in this New Year 2023

Sincerely,



Kathy Snider



Maria and mom Magdalena

Mission Update:

The primary school in the village is supposedly going to return to full-time, in- person classes this year. At this writing, a date for initiation of classes has not been announced, so the library has been busy. Cardamom prices remain painfully low and the corn harvest will be in April. We are reaching out to those who are most in need for food (corn and beans) assistance. Our scholarship program this year has eleven students in junior high through university and seven children in primary school. Our latrine, tinaco, and housing assistance will resume in the dry season when the rains are less. Kathy will return to Guatemala on February 20th.

OUR MISSION STATEMENT

Ixcán Ministries is a Christian lay mission serving as a ministry of presence with the Maya people in the Ixcán jungle of Guatemala. We act as a bridge between cultures for the exchange of gifts to transform lives and society.

Our programs include- Scholarships, Community Library, Women's Micro-business, Medical, Housing, and Food Assistance, Spiritual and Pastoral Accompaniment, and Promotion of Peace and Justice.

Ixcán Ministries is a 501(c) 3 organization. Your contributions are tax deductible.

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