



View of Nosara from the mountains

La Esperanza Garcia de Nosara, hidden in the mountains in the Guanacaste region of Costa Rica, could only be reached after 40 minutes of adventurous four-wheeler drive from the neighboring town. The only teacher of this elementary school Alan Ruiz takes this trip every day twice with his motorbike. The rainy season (June-October) only makes the trip harder, taking him up to two hours each way.

Four wheeler

There are 12 students in this public elementary school, from age 6 to 12. They are the children of farmers, hotel workers and maids. Most children in this school follow their parents' footsteps in the future. The school was founded in 1975; however the population in the nearby mountain areas decreased drastically in the past decade, consequently shrinking the student size by half. The church on top of the mountain is their classroom, without proper bathroom and lacking majority of basic school supplies. After graduation, students who can afford going to the local high school in Nosara will continue their education, but most of them will work. I was determined to expand their future vision by improving their educational environment and opportunity.



My purpose was to vitalize this school in every possible way. They had to be recognized from their 'municipio', the city council for more funding and support. They needed basic school supplies. They needed textbooks. They needed proper school kitchen to feed the students' hungry stomach. (Lunch budget/student/meal was 40 cents, a third of that of the other schools.) The teacher needed English education to fill in the wide gap between other schools in Costa Rica.

My initial plan of making an international children's library had to be changed completely, for after more extensive research and several phone calls with the professor prior to arrival, I realized that what the school really needed was something more essential for these children's regular primary school education.

I visited two primary schools prior to 'the forgotten school' -one in San Jose and one in Nicoya, Guanacaste. Both schools had over 200 students and had proper classrooms fully equipped with educational materials necessary for primary school education: concordant with my expectation as a primary school in the nation with the most developed educational system in Central America. I based the established systems of these two schools as a long term goal for my project. The nationally distributed syllabus for each subject taught at primary schools was very impressive; clear, concise and extremely well thought out. This was also available for Alan, therefore by providing materials currently lacking in the school, it seemed quite possible that this school could reach educational level of other schools.

However, material supplies are exhaustive: they would last only for another few years, and their effect is limited in the long term. Therefore, enhancing support from the city council to improve financial situation of this school in the long term was crucial. I talked to the city council through Grace Ruiz Chavez. The reality was that the financial problem was faced not only by the school but also by the city council. They had just raised enough funds to install proper sanitary toilet in the school this December. However, with support from several local governments in the region, the proposal for funding to bring electricity in the school was approved: the school will have electricity for the first time this January.

The city council was in charge of protecting the region from expanding tourism: steer tourism development in a way to protect the region from environmental, sociological and economical problems. They were working to protect local farmers from tourists seeking to buy land properties of this beautiful, hidden area –from uneducated farmers who do not know the true value of their land. Some farmers are blinded by the face value of offer they get for their land, sell their land without hesitation, and move to the city where they find no work. This is one of the reasons why the student body has continued to shrink.

Notebooks, pens, pencils, erasers, papers, scissors, paints, brushes, whiteboard, dictionaries... the list of school supplies that the school and the students needed was endless. Textbooks were bought according to the list that Alan had given me. Prior to this project, Alan had to make photocopies of relevant study materials for each student every single day, and students were using outdated textbooks that were donated by the neighboring city school almost a decade ago. It was not only within the classroom that needed change. The school 'kitchen' consisted of a small fireplace and several pans. Once every month, student's parents were in charge of transporting one-month worth of school lunch from the foot of the mountain.

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Unlike other primary schools where English is taught from first grade, students in this school did not receive English education. (The two schools I visited in the cities had teachers for every subject.) In this region where tourism development has been prominent, English ability would be extremely useful. Following the advice of an English teacher in San Jose elementary school, Alan is now registered for an English teaching class starting this coming December in Nicoya for two months, a place close to his home. He hopes to start teaching basic English starting next academic year (February~). English textbooks were bought with CDs, along with a brand new CD player. Now the school has access to radio which Alan hopes to use for classes.



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School entrance



Studying with new school supplies

All of the new school supplies had to be carried by a four wheeler up the mountain, and I will never forget the day when students opened the big boxes delivered for them. It was amazing to see students' faces bright up with excitement. Few weeks ago I received amazing news that Natacha, a third grade student had won a prize in the regional drawing contest with her piece of art completed in this school. In addition, another student had won a regional speech contest. This news reaffirmed my belief that education is the most fundamental, strongest force for change and personal development, and every effort should be made to give every child an opportunity to pursue their interest and passion through education.

Throughout the project I was constantly inspired by Alan's positive attitude, his passion for teaching and love for his students. He would organize soccer match for students and their families and would personally raise funds for the school. Without his spirit this project would not have been possible.

Last but not least, special thank you to the class of 1978 foundation for the generous support and opportunity. This experience challenged my views of development, completely altered my thoughts of 'what it is to be happy', and enriched my soul to the full.



Alan and his students