



Promoting reading among Esmeraldas' youth.

The Read Book Program*



Returned Peace Corps Volunteer Julie Smithwick Story



Members of "Libro Leído" enjoy some of the club's 250 books

Julie Smithwick came to work with the Salesian Project, a Catholic organization that works with Youth Development programs, in the city of Esmeraldas on the northern coast of Ecuador. Almost immediately she encountered an indifferent attitude toward reading. The town lacked public libraries, teachers sent out readings as punishment for unruly students, and the Volunteer's friends and neighbors were always surprised to find her reading for the sheer joy of reading.

When she heard that many adults in Esmeraldas were illiterate, she knew something had to be done. The idea for "Libro Leído" was born when Julie remembered that during her childhood a pizzeria offered children free pizza for every 10 written summaries of books they read. The promotion motivated her to read, but would it be the same for children in Ecuador?

"The situation was very bad, I wasn't sure if it would work, but my counterparts picked up on this idea and we decided to give it a try," said Julie.

They began by inviting six teenage girls to form the club. Julie explained to the club members that they would earn prizes donated by local sponsors for every ten books they read. Although the idea of a book club disappointed them for a moment, the prizes captured their interest. She obtained the first books by asking local bookstores for donations, and when she showed the texts to the new club members, they were fascinated. They had never seen such interesting books, with colorful pictures and imaginary stories. All the reading they had done before was of boring content and without any pictures. In a city with no public libraries, the program also offered participants the chance to take the books home.

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Julie, center, was not sure about the initiative, however her Counterparts helped her out and it worked

During the weekly meetings, club members participated in activities related to the content of the books such as making props of the characters and reenacted the story with activities and role-plays. In addition, the meetings were an opportunity to exchange their books and give oral summaries. In a short time, the girls had read and summarized their ten books and won a pizza in the downtown area. Since the girls lived in slums, a night downtown was a special occasion. Prizes, however, were not the members' biggest incentive. "I like it because from books we learn other things that allow us to develop our minds," Daniela said.

All it took was word of mouth for the program to grow. Soon the club had 60 members ranging from the youngest students in the school to high school students.

To better accommodate new members the group was divided by age and another club was formed due to growth. Where once it took months to reach the goal of 10 books, it was now done in a matter of weeks. Donations from Julie's friends and family in the United States helped satisfy the demand for new books. The success of the program prompted the Salesian project to include the cost of the books in its annual budget.

** Taken and adapted from the Magazine "40 years of Peace Corps Ecuador" of John Zorovich.*