

PROVIDING EFFECTIVE LIBRARY AND COMMUNITY SERVICES

Offer Rewarding and Empowering Life Experiences With Community Center Services

Research or develop protocols and keep them current.

Protocols for offering Community Center Services within a Mobile Library are available upon request. Our protocols are reviewed yearly and updated as needed. We currently travel to more than thirty surrounding communities with games, crafts, and events for children as well as with books to be loaned. Interacting with the children at these rural schools is always the favorite pastime for volunteers.

Most service programs provided by local towns in Central America are funded so inadequately as to be nearly destitute. Most of the providers, including teachers, nurses, and doctors, are underpaid, overworked, and inadequately trained. They also are dedicated, earnest, and willing to do whatever is possible to take care of their community.

A cooperative model is the most sustainable approach for all. We post our mobile schedule with the local school board, mayor's office and Health Center and then offer rides and lunch to anyone who wants or needs to provide services to the surrounding communities. A dental hygienist might provide dental hygiene instruction and bring new toothbrushes or a nurse might offer healthy pregnancy and well-baby clinics at the same time that we loan the books. School superintendents hitch a ride with us to check on schools not on any bus routes. The resource open to all is creativity. Programs that work together thrive.

More information about the Hester J. Hodgdon Libraries for All Programs is available at <http://www.librariesforall.org/>. **More information about the San Juan del Sur Biblioteca is available at** <http://www.sjdsbiblioteca.org/>. **Email** hjhprogram@aol.com.

SAN JUAN DEL SUR BIBLIOTECA MÓVIL:

EXPLORING SEVEN ASPECTS OF SUSTAINABILITY FOR LENDING LIBRARY PROJECTS IN NICARAGUA AND OTHER DEVELOPING NATIONS

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My experience developing a library and related projects in Nicaragua has been a long series of lessons about the important tasks required to sustain a nonprofit project in a developing country.

More than twelve years after the library's humble beginnings, it is surviving and thriving and has spread its efforts throughout Central America. Here are some of the most important lessons I've learned along the way:

LEADERSHIP DEVELOPMENT

Be Adaptable to Avoid Burnout

Each project has its own passionate director and team of creators.

Most programs are the brainchild of one individual with a passion and vision for how a project should function. While this gets a valuable program going, it sows the seeds of its own demise if that individual cannot become flexible and adapt to the program's ongoing development. Burnout is a major cause of program failure. A passionate director's project is doomed if there is failure to invite and include a local team of creators and allow them leeway to create.

This is especially important when there are cultural divisions to overcome. When team members suggest using their traditional style of celebration or design, take their input as a compliment and seriously consider the suggestions. The emerging nations have much to offer that is rich and rewarding. These small differences often make the project more familiar and acceptable to the patrons you wish to serve.

COLLECTION DEVELOPMENT

Adapt the Buy, Beg, and Borrow Approach

Provide culturally appropriate materials and maintain fine-tuned lending systems.

We began our collection of titles in Spanish with hand-me-downs from libraries in New York City, Boston, and Denver. We purchased from library sales in Ft. Collins and Greeley, Colorado. We began purchasing books from Scholastic using points donated by librarians and teachers.

Publishers at Book Expo America shows and ALA conventions donated books to us; in some cases, those donations are ongoing. We purchase at shows at steep discounts and ship through the various show hosts such as GES and Freeman.

The HJH Program based in Colorado purchases all the new books and donates them to the SJDS Library or provides them at cost to recipients of the Library in a Box program.

Often publishers donate multiple copies of each book, so we have traded titles with other NGO library programs. Making all these connections has helped us build our collections for minimal cost.

We work hard to keep the return rate of books to the library and mobile program high, since books are central to our program. We often find that locals are better about returning books promptly than expats are.

Most of Nicaragua's 143 municipal libraries currently have no lending system in place; books can be used only at the library. Finding the right systems—not too out-of-date but also not too elaborate—and knowing when to update a system are necessary skills for sustainability.

SUFFICIENT STAFFING

Develop Expertise in Administration of Staff and Volunteers

Give staff authority, autonomy, and esteem.

One of the most important outcomes for third-world projects is to provide careers and a higher standard of living to the local population. Every director should aim to offer valuable and rewarding life experiences now and tools for the future to staff. The more education, gentle instruction, and great work experiences local staff and foreign volunteers can experience together, the greater the impact your project has on the community it serves. Different countries have different laws; nonprofits should learn the local employment rules and abide by them completely. It is never enhancing to a program to act the Ugly American, treating staff with less than courtesy and respect. Conflicts occur especially where language, cultural, and work ethic differences can cause misunderstandings. It is said in Central America that for every critical comment given, three compliments are required.

Volunteers also need special consideration since they give valuable time and considerable personal resources to help international projects. The volunteer application should help ascertain suitability and the best use of a volunteer's skills and time. Our volunteers are encouraged to make suggestions and to create their own experience within available options. A staff person should be assigned to coordinate with volunteers.

The impact of helping people in a poor country can last a lifetime; the experience can be a rich and pivotal event in the lives of volunteers. Give volunteers an opportunity to blend with a different and rich culture while providing for their safety and comfort. Some of the most sustaining and valuable support comes from the efforts of returning volunteers.

Whether you are a director of a new program or an aspiring volunteer, the most important items to pack for sustainable international programs are patience and a sense of humor.

FINANCIAL RESOURCES

Find and Keep Funding Sources

Provide connection, transparent accountability, and accurate projections.

Sound fiscal management is essential. A sustainable program is one whose affairs are in order. Attention to detail in keeping receipts, following budgets, and updating records is a mundane but essential element in keeping the doors open. Many projects fail simply because no one is minding the store. The Gilbert Center publishes *Nonprofit Online News* at <http://news.gilbert.org/>. This site provides helpful information for nonprofits, including publications and seminars.

One Gilbert seminar on seamless fundraising stressed that for each time money is requested from a supporter, the organization should create three separate, low-cost opportunities to say "thank you" before funds are requested again. Waste and cost should be kept to a minimum; no donor wants to receive an obviously expensive mailing asking for more money. When you show you appreciate their resources and will use them wisely, you can convert one-time donors to long-time supporters. Updates, correspondence, simple websites, or informative newsletters help to create the atmosphere that encourages devoted supporters.

Programs often fail after they have reached a measure of success and begin to expand too rapidly. Enthusiasm is essential but a sustainable program that can be counted on is more valuable to a third-world community than state-of-the-art equipment and an expansive facility that will soon close due to inadequate funding, leaving disappointment and loss of hope.



CLEARLY DEFINED ONGOING GOALS

Organic Expansion Embraces Natural Outcomes

Ascertain sustainability and buy-in from the target group.

Good programs expand. It is their nature. Fear of this expansion and a rigidity that says these new requests of us are not in our mission statement can stagnate a good program and keep it from becoming great. While it is essential to maintain the central focus, expansion can safely take place. For us, this means each new facility must have its own supporters eager to start their project. They need to have or find a space to house their library or mobile project and to have funding plans in place. (See the application for the Library in a Box program). In all of our programs, it is locals who are the paid staff and who are encouraged to take leadership roles in each project.

Projects tend to fail if they are imposed on a community because an outsider perceives a need. Before launching a program, make sure community members welcome it, see a need for it, and are willing to sustain the program. Challenge grants, volunteer systems, and advisory groups all allow the local population to feel empowered and in control.

Research comes before success; lack of knowledge about local realities can doom a program. For example, a seminar taught by a famous reading specialist who was fluent in Spanish failed for lack of information. The reading instructor did not know that refreshments are customarily offered at such workshops, he was not given enough funds to provide handouts for all the teachers, and he was not told by those arranging the class that there were no books in the schools! Our library, had it known of the problem, could have made the additional copies, provided refreshments, and perhaps even located the needed books in sets. Cooperation among nonprofit organizations providing services in an area helps everyone.

We often collect supplies for another foundation in San Juan del Sur, while that foundation has provided support to the library

through a fundraiser. The more we help each other, the more we can meet goals in our communities.

When you are helping a community, be mindful of everyone's need for self-respect. For instance, one way to receive double benefit while raising funds is to have a yard sale, with items priced low. This event raises at least some money for community programs, and it also provides needed goods to people by replacing the shame of a handout with the excitement of shopping.

SUCCESSION PLANNING

Learn the Art of Letting Go

Create redundancy, find the heirs apparent, and let them have their say!

We learn to our chagrin that none of us is indispensable when illness and accidents occur, but our programs will suffer without leadership. It is better to create redundancy and back up plans before disaster strikes. If a delegated project meets 75 percent of the expectation of the one delegating, that is a successful handoff. Those doing the work will feel an increased sense of interest and dedication if their actions garner approval and appreciation. Flexible leaders who recognize creativity and encourage feedback create long-lasting, healthy programs.

