

## Victorino's Story

The establishment and rise of the first indigenous academic schools in the Ngäbe-Buglé Region of Chiriqui, Panama



(l-r) Victorino Rodriguez, David Simmons, a visiting Bahá'í from the US, and Roberto, a teacher at the school.

IT'S FIVE O'CLOCK in the morning, and dawn's first light spreads like a deep crimson gash across the dark Chiriqui sky. Victorino is already on his way. Every Monday, he makes the three-hour walk from his home in Soloy to Quebrada Venado – high in the lush, green mountains of Panama. (The journey takes six hours for those unaccustomed to the steep climb in the jungle's steamy heat and dripping humidity.)

Victorino walks quickly along the narrow trails, in a hurry to arrive by 8 am when classes start. With only coffee for breakfast, he is sometimes overcome by dizziness or muscle cramps along the way, as he winds through green rice fields, green banana groves, green coconut palms and green moss-covered rocks, gently stepping over endless columns of red leaf-cutter ants marching obliviously on their way – each carrying a mouthful of bright green torn from the rainforest, with the thick red clay earth of Panama underfoot.

A dozen school children have been standing lookout since 7.30. Their parents have been working in the fields

since dawn, so the children are alone for the day. As Victorino rounds the last hill, a joyful shout goes up and the students rush out to greet their teacher. He names each name and embraces each one with exquisite tenderness. Then, like a mother hen unfolding her

in the province of Chiriqui in Western Panama. The schoolteachers have formed an Association and elected their officials. They hope to construct a small office someday and establish a library. But for now, the schools have no books, no erasers or chalk, no staplers, rulers, glue, scissors or tape – none of the typical classroom supplies – just the teachers and their students.

Victorino returns home every Friday evening to spend the weekend with his wife and three small children. The youngest, just turned three, is ill with a lung infection, but there is no health insurance, no doctor, and no money for medicine. The teacher works without salary “for love of the children,” he explains “and obedience to my Faith.” A small stipend of \$50 / month barely covers the cost of rice and sometimes a small package of beans or lentils which he has learned to cook himself over an open fire, after school gets out each afternoon. During lean times before the harvest, he often eats only one meal a day.

The people of Quebrada Venado are grateful to their schoolteacher and treat him with obvious respect. As subsistence farmers, they have no food to offer, but take turns providing firewood for Victorino's outdoor kitchen. They have built him a small wood-framed shelter with corrugated

*When the load becomes too heavy to bear,  
And your legs will no longer take you there,  
We, the indigenous people,  
Bow our heads and keep walking.  
For there is nothing else we can do.*

Victorino

wings to cover her tiny chicks, he puts his arms around them all, as they walk together the last kilometre to school.

Victorino Rodriguez, aged 36, teaches full time at the Quebrada Venado school. His classroom holds 34 students, ranging from five to eleven years old, and forms part of a growing system of academic schools located on the Ngäbe-Buglé (Guaymí) reservation

zinc panels on three sides, a packed mud floor and a narrow wooden platform for his bed.

There is no running water, so he walks for half an hour down to the river to bathe. There is no light, no mattress, no blanket or pillow; only a single rusty coat hanger dangling from a ceiling rafter to hold his extra shirt – which is threadbare, but pressed and clean. A



A happy student

worn enamel bowl, the design long-since faded away, and a dented aluminium spoon complete the adornments to Victorino's second home.

Week after week, month after month, Victorino walks alone to his mountain school, to bring the light of education to the students he calls "mis hijitos" (my little children). "Are you doing this for your Year of Service?" a visitor asks. "Seven years," he replies with a gentle smile.

The villagers understand and appreciate his sacrifice, as they too, have sacrificed much in order to educate their children. "I cannot read or write," says one, "but my children will learn to read and write." "With this school, our children will be freed from the darkness of ignorance," states another. "These children are our future."

The villagers live in scattered huts that blend into the green hillsides. The native people were forced into these hills by European invaders over 500 years ago, and have lived in the same rustic conditions ever since. The school is the only building in the community. Its construction took three years, as men and women patiently carried bags of cement on their own backs along these same mountain trails, and scooped up sand from the river below to mix with the cement to build their school.

No public schools are provided to these indigenous communities, in part because no certified teachers can be convinced to live in such remote and inhospitable conditions; and in part because they are "just Indians." Some Latinos in the city still refuse to sit next to an indigenous person on the bus, even if it is the only seat available.

"No one else cares about us," the villagers explain. "There are lots of promises, but no action. We are a forgotten people." So they asked the Bahá'ís to help them build a school. Some of the villagers are Bahá'ís, some are Catholics, some Evangelicals, and some follow the native Mama Tata religion. They know the Bahá'ís will not ask them to change their faith or their traditional ways.

The Quebrada Venado School is open to all, offering a standard academic curriculum from 8.00 am to 1.00 pm, Monday through Friday, with a class on "Virtues and Values" on Wednesday afternoons. There are seven other schools, each with a similar story to tell. The school closest to the town of Soloy is a one-hour walk; the farthest, about twelve. Most of the classrooms are literally "schools without walls," consisting of a thatched palm roof supported by wooden poles.



Yamileda and Gustavo, two indigenous children at the school

Last year, when Victorino was serving in a different community, the Quebrada Venado School was closed for lack of a teacher. Over the years, five of thirteen schools were forced to close for the same reason. Many teachers left to find work in town in order to support their families. Then, about seven years ago, a group of young Bahá'ís from Soloy got together to consult on the urgent need for education in the rural communities.

These youth made a solemn pact to offer themselves as teachers, and to remain for as long as they were needed, even without salary, whatever the sacrifice. Benita Palacios has been serving for nine years; Ismael Atencio for eight; Victorino, for seven. "Our own families are poor," he says, "but how can we leave these precious children without education?"

Victorino himself is a striking combination of determination and submission, strength and humility. High cheekbones, brown skin and straight black hair reflect his Ngäbe heritage. He speaks softly, his voice restrained, yet his eyes are intense with fire when he speaks of justice. His compact body has been shortened by days of hunger; his powerful calves, muscled by years of walking the green Chiriqui hills. His only shoes, worn to holes on these trails, are stained with the deep red earth of Panama.

When twenty school teachers gathered recently in Soloy for an educator's seminar they were asked why they continued to serve under such difficult conditions. Every one of them replied, "For love of the children."

And so, like the silent columns of leaf-cutter ants that Victorino passes each Monday on his long journey to school, unnoticed and unsung, the teachers walk, and the villagers carry their bags of cement, steadfastly marching toward a future they may only see in their dreams.

Written by Dr Randie Gottlieb, a member of the Mona Foundation Board of Directors, on her return from a three-week visit to the Ngäbe Buglé Schools

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*If you would like to help support these native schools, please contact the Mona Foundation:*

13922 64th Pl. W., Edmonds,  
WA 98026, USA  
Tel: (425) 743-4550  
Email:  
monafoundation@worldnet.att.net  
www.monafoundation.org





Victorino Sanchez

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.

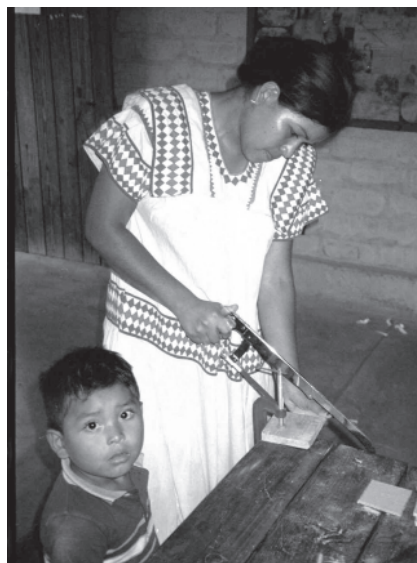
Despite the long hours of the workshop, the teachers' thirst for learning seems unquenchable, and they ask for classes on Saturday and in the evenings as well. Even dinner is regularly postponed while the late afternoon session is extended until dark.

Máxima 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 re-arranging 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 good-natured teasing of their colleagues. Many have not had their picture taken before.

That night, a small closing ceremony is planned by the participants. It



Lineth Montezuma at work



Lineth cutting fabric squares

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.

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