

Montessori in the Jungle of Panama

Story and photos by
Randie Gottlieb

Chiriqui Province, Panama, April 2004: The sweet smell of cedar sawdust fills the air, and the rhythmic back-and-forth of a lone hacksaw harmonizes with an insistent tap-tap-tapping of oversized tropical raindrops announcing an imminent downpour. Suddenly, all clouds burst, and the entire sky becomes a waterfall, its deafening beat thundering off the corrugated tin roof of the Ngabe-Bugle Cultural Center in Soloy.

Sra. Máxima is inside preparing a meal of rice and beans, while Victorino Rodriguez is hard at work, along with fifteen other school teachers. They labor in silence, oblivious to the rain, preparing Montessori materials to take back to their schools. One is on government salary; the rest are volunteers, serving full-time as teachers for the native children who live in the remote mountain communities of Chiriqui.

“Our own families are poor,” says Mr. Rodriguez, who has been a volunteer teacher for seven years, “but how can we leave these precious children without education?” He works at the Quebrada Venado School, one of eight primary schools established by the Ngabe-Bugle people high in the mountains of western Panama. Together these schools serve over three hundred students.

The government has been unable to maintain an educational system in these isolated areas. “The children, because of the remote communities in which they live — sometimes up to ten hours walking distance from the nearest town, would receive no edu-



Above: Tabireh Sanchez displays her handiwork. (Note blue-painted cans in back, used as spindle boxes.)

cation at all, were it not for these schools,” said Rosemary Baily, Secretary of the Foundation for Development and Culture (FUNDESCU), a non-governmental organization in Panama that supports the schools.

The teachers, indigenous people themselves, some of whom have not completed high school, are gradually being trained as educators. They are attending an intensive two-week course, where they will earn three credits towards the fourteen required to become government-certified and receive a salary. The training, conducted by the author, is being sponsored by the Mona Foundation, a non-profit based in the United States. It includes classes in Montessori teaching methods and the production of hands-on sensorial and math materials.

In the Montessori math workshop each

afternoon, participants take turns using the hacksaw, drill, and other tools to craft practical, inexpensive materials which will help their students learn to sort, classify count, understand the decimal system, and perform basic math operations. These



Right: Teacher Lineth Montezuma making fabric squares for matching exercise.

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items are produced using hand tools, since there is no electricity in the area. In addition, the materials must be durable enough to survive the bugs, mud, rain and all-consuming humidity of the Panamanian jungle.

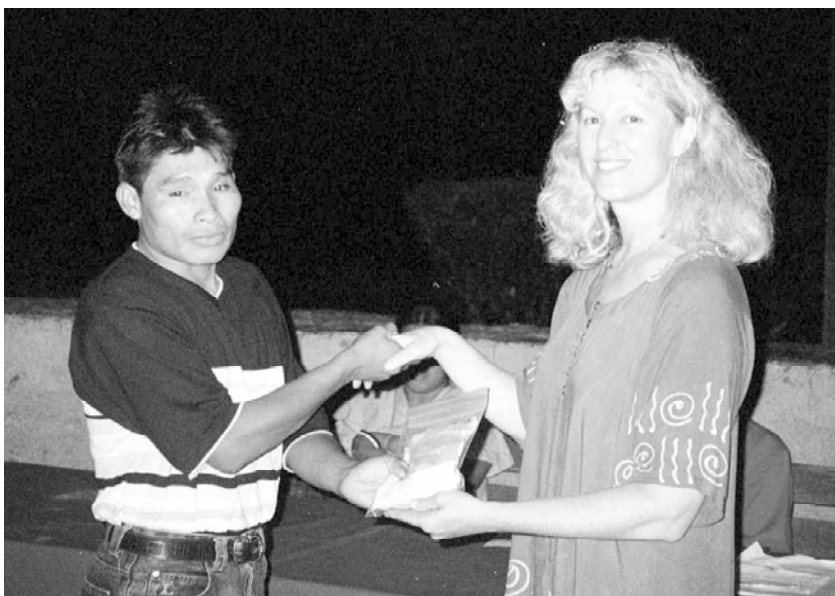
It is an impressive sight — young Ngabe women in their colorful floor-length *naguas* (the traditional dress), cutting wood and measuring right angles with a T-square, a pencil tucked behind one ear. During a break, one teacher slips off to a corner to nurse her baby, then returns to cut more wood. She is making the short numerical rods.

“The Montessori methodology learned in the seminar has been of great assistance to me in teaching the children in my school. We should continue with this method to facilitate their learning,” says Julio Moreno of Cerro Bolo.

According to Ismael Atencio of Quebrada Molejon, “This training has been in tune with the reality faced by the teachers, the children and the communities. We were able to prepare a variety of didactic materials to serve as models, so the teachers would have a clear understanding. This allowed us to construct additional materials and to better the quality of our schools in creative and innovative ways.”

Roberto Palacio of Alto Naranjo has been serving as a volunteer for eleven years. “This was the best training we have ever had,” he says. “We were given an opportunity to design our own educational materials and to bring these back to our own communities to teach the children. The beads, the abacus, the decimal materials are now at our fingertips.” His wife, Maria Teresa Bejerano, also a teacher, is participating in the workshop as well.

After two intensive weeks, the training course has come to an end, and a photo session is scheduled for the last afternoon. The teachers



(Above) The author (right) receiving a gift from Genaro Rodriguez during the graduation ceremony.

proudly display their handiwork on tables in the dining hall and pose for individual portraits. The handmade math materials are set out and carefully arranged.

On the last night, a small closing ceremony begins with prayers and singing in three languages (Spanish, English, and Ngabere). There are eloquent speeches, an exchange of gifts, laughter and a few tears. The official certificates are being signed by the Ministry of Education and won't be delivered for several days. But the teachers are undaunted. They are already making plans for the next course.

Montessori education, which began in Italy in 1907, in less than a century, has spread to the Ngabe people in the highland jungles of Panama.

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Dr. Gottlieb has worked as a college administrator, professor, school-teacher and principal. She is a co-founder of the Mona Foundation, a non-profit organization that supports grassroots educational development around the world.

The Mona Foundation supports grassroots educational initiatives and works to raise the status of women and girls in the United States and abroad. If you would like to support these native schools, please contact the Mona Foundation: 13922 64th Place West, Edmonds, WA 98026 USA, Tel: (425) 743-4550. Email: MonaFoundation@worldnet.att.net, Web: www.monafoundation.org. Your contributions are tax deductible.

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