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To Our Donors,

The seemingly endless wait for release of “approved” grant funding continues. Last week, the Nicaraguan government finally approved our application to register as an NGO in Nicaragua. However, the grantor, CBM, requires that we open a corporate bank account in Nicaragua. This is a two step process: 1) in lieu of my personally appearing at the bank, I need to grant a power of attorney for banking transactions to our board member in Managua; and 2) we need to raise a minimum of \$1,000US to open a non-profit corporate account. The power of attorney document, like all foreign documents, must be properly authenticated – meaning the executed document must be accompanied by proof that the notary is bona fide. Once again, paperwork must be submitted to the Maine Secretary of State, then to Hillary Clinton’s office in Washington, DC, followed by the Nicaraguan consulate in New York. Any mail sent to the US Department of State must first be irradiated for security reasons. In short, the entire process takes many weeks. I am going to try to convince the bank to waive some of these steps since the bank’s copy of our corporate bylaws and certificate of incorporation have already been authenticated. In any case, in addition to the weekly cost of \$185 to sustain our current projects, we now must manage to raise \$1,000 to open an account. During the course of all this, our plans to assign Sayda Parrales as a Deaf teacher for the secondary school class in Condega and to implement a meaningful outreach program for rural Deaf children must be suspended.

Well, enough of the usual hard luck tale. I would prefer to update you on our progress with Sayda. While we have seven benchmarks, we focused training this time in three areas: SignWriting, math and general world knowledge. To be sure, we introduced other topics, including sign language metalinguistics and teaching methodologies. But, we will devote more time to these subjects next winter.

Using scores of documentaries, biopics and classic movies (Hollywood and foreign), we covered quite a bit of history, from the Protestant Reformation through recent events. Our final film for Sayda was called “Carol’s Journey” – a coming of age flick about a 12 year old girl confronting the disintegration of her family during the Spanish American civil war. The year is 1938, and her relatives, like all of Spain, are torn between support for democratic republicanism and fascism. Essentially, we see a 12 year old struggling to understand the “adult” political complexities around her. With some parallels, these issues were played out in Nicaraguan history, as well – “leftists and rightists”, haves and have-nots, democracy vs. totalitarianism, all in a Spanish speaking culture. It occurs to me that a Deaf person, with limited educational background and restricted access to public political discourse, must really struggle to make sense of it all. Our goal, therefore, has been to give Sayda perspective, to equip her to critically analyze her world so that she can participate effectively in changing it. Is that not the reason we want all children to be educated?

In math, we focused on basic skills. Sayda's math achievement when she arrived was at about the fourth grade level. She could add and subtract well enough. She understood multiplication, but had never memorized multiplication tables, and therefore could not perform long division tasks reliably. Fractions were a complete mystery. We began with number line theory – seeing the “big picture” – and quickly shifted into working with fractions, and later, decimals. Always, the goal has been to see the process, as opposed to merely blindly following a set of rules. Over time, we included some plane geometry and, for the fun of it, some trigonometric concepts – but these topics were introduced as sneak previews of things to come. We also devoted many classes to algebraic thinking. Always, our goal was to show that one could attack a problem from different angles and employ alternative computations to arrive at the same result. In this manner, over time, critical analysis skills honed in math classes can be applied to other life challenges. For three months, Sayda dutifully performed her assignments, but I do not believe the underlying concept of “seeing the number line” really clicked until her last math class. It was as if the light bulb suddenly clicked on – one day before it was time for her to return to Managua.

Sayda was most interested in SignWriting. Sayda's Spanish abilities are quite good – probably the most achievement I have seen demonstrated by a Deaf Nicaraguan. However, Sayda is an exception, and she recognizes this. She also appreciates that SignWriting can be the key to first language literacy, that is to say, sign language literacy, for Deaf students in Nicaragua. We practiced various reading lessons: dinosaurs, Aztecs, Don Quijote, Lindbergh, to name just a few.

The CBM grant will cover salaries for our current two Deaf teachers in Condega, our Deaf teacher in Bilwi and up to three new Deaf teachers. Teacher training takes three years, but a new teacher can be assigned work after completion of the first session. The grant will also fund implementation of an outreach program whereby we recruit Deaf secondary school students to lead weekend sign language clinics for rural families with deaf children. Although the original grant proposal covered teacher training, we have agreed to assume those costs independently. In exchange, more grant funds will be allocated to the outreach program.



Thank you so much for your generosity,

James Shepard-Kegl

*To donate via PayPal, please go to our website:
www.nicaraguansignlanguageprojects.org*

Sayda PARRALES on her winter overnight survival hike, White Mountains, New Hampshire. Trekking the mountains around Condega should now be tame by comparison.