

Teaching kids to read from the back of a burro



Luis Soriano's 'biblioburro' has helped some 4,000 children in rural Colombia.

Magdalena, Colombia (CNN) -- To the unaccustomed eye, a man toting 120 books while riding a stubborn donkey would seem nothing short of a circus spectacle. But for hundreds of children in the rural villages of Colombia, Luis Soriano is far from a clown. He is a man with a mission to save rural children from illiteracy.

"There was a time when many people thought that I was going crazy," said Soriano, a native of La Gloria, Colombia. "They'd yell, 'Carnival season is over.' ... Now I've overcome that."

Soriano, 38, is a primary school teacher who spends his free time operating a "biblioburro," a mobile library on donkeys that offers reading education for hundreds of children living in what he describes as "abandoned regions" in the Colombian state of Magdalena.

"In [rural] regions, a child must walk or ride a donkey for up to 40 minutes to reach the closest schools," Soriano said. "The children have very few opportunities to go to secondary school. ... There are [few] teachers that would like to teach in the countryside."

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At the start of his 17-year teaching career, Soriano realized that some students were having difficulty not just learning, but finishing their homework assignments. Most of the students falling behind lived in rural villages, where illiterate parents and lack of access to books prevented them from completing their studies.

To help bridge the learning gap, Soriano decided to personally bring books to the children.

"I saw two unemployed donkeys at home and had the idea [to use] them in my biblioburro project because they can carry a heavy load," Soriano said. "I put the books on their backs in saddles and they became my work tools."

Every Wednesday at dusk and every Saturday at dawn, Soriano leaves his wife and three young children to travel to select villages -- up to four hours each way -- aboard a donkey named Alfa. A second donkey, Beto, follows behind, toting additional books and a sitting blanket. They visit 15 villages on a rotating basis.

"It's not easy to travel through the valleys," Soriano said. "You sit on a donkey for five or eight hours, you get very tired. It's a satisfaction to arrive to your destination."

At each village, some 40-50 youngsters await their chance to get homework help, learn to read or listen to any variety of tall tales, adventure stories and geography lessons Soriano has prepared.

"You can just see that the kids are excited when they see the biblioburro coming this way. It makes them happy that he continues to come," said Dairo Holguin, 34, whose two children take part in the program. "For us, his program complements what the children learn in school. The books they do not have access to ... they get from the biblioburro."

More than 4,000 youngsters have benefited from Soriano's program since it began in 1990. Soriano says countless others have been helped, too; parents and other adult learners often participate in the lessons.

Soriano has spent nearly 4,000 hours riding his donkeys, and he's not traveled unscathed. In July 2008, he fractured his leg when he fell from one of the donkeys; in 2006, he was pounced on by bandits at a river crossing and tied to a tree when they found out

he had no money. Despite these injuries, which left him with a limp, Soriano has no intention of slowing down.

In addition to the biblioburro program, he and his wife built the largest free library in Magdalena next to their home. The library has 4,200 books, most of which are donated -- some from as far away as New York City. They also run a small community restaurant.

Soriano's hope is that people will understand the power of reading and that communities can improve from being exposed to books and diverse ideas.

"For us teachers, it's an educational triumph, and for the parents [it's] a great satisfaction when a child learns how to read. That's how a community changes and the child becomes a good citizen and a useful person," Soriano said. "Literature is how we connect them with the world."

Want to get involved? Check out Luis Soriano's website at www.fundacionbiblioburro.com and see how to help.

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