

# My Antigua: Rigoberto Zamora Charuc

**"The children discover that questions are answered, and the answers are in a book somewhere."**

**Tell us about yourself.**

I'm from Guatemala. My parents and siblings speak Kaqchikel. When I was seventeen, I had the opportunity to attend school in Sololá. There were some North American and Guatemalan professors there. They taught me something very important about the power to change one's life. That is where I learned the power of education: a power that has the capacity to bring complete change to one's life. That is when it came to me that education is a very important element and I vowed to do something in the field of education in Guatemala. Here, in this country, there is no education; that is why the development of the people in general and the country at large is so difficult. The story is the same everywhere: there is a lot of poverty, the mother cannot work as she has seven or eight children, the father drinks a lot of alcohol and doesn't have a job, but the child wants to study and better his or her life, and then the parents are a little distanced from the children. I wish we could do something to bring the family unit closer.

**Tell us about PROBIGUA (Proyecto Bibliotecas Guatemala).**

Since 1985, I had the idea of doing something for the education of the poor in Guatemala. In 1992, my wife and I founded the first library in San Pedro Yepocapa. In 1994, we started the Spanish Academy PROBIGUA in La Antigua, and have since founded a library each year, currently we have sixteen public libraries in different parts of the country. In 1998, we started the Biblioteca Móvil Bus project, funded by our Swiss friends. In 2001, the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation rewarded our efforts and vision to provide technology access to poor people, so now we have nineteen computer centers in different parts of Guatemala. In 2005,



District  
5050 Rotary  
Club of Canada  
and the USA financed the  
second bus in Chimaltenango.

Child Aid of Portland Oregon has also been a financial support for our project; they have donated thousands of books in Spanish that are currently used in hundreds of schools and libraries across the country. We also have a scholarship program for underprivileged youth which every year funds the education of 70 youths from Guatemala.

**Give us a little history on how Biblioteca Móvil Bus got started.**

In 1997, I was just ruminating on how to put PROBIGUA in the hearts and minds of the people here and everywhere. My Swiss friends and I were thinking, "What is an idea that will cost less than \$10,000?" because all good ideas were costly, and we didn't have any money. These friends were ex-students of our Spanish school in La Antigua and they helped raise funds in Europe. People donated books. We got a bus. And for the last 13 years, this bus has been going around La Antigua to different schools.

**When and where do your mobile libraries go?**

Due to lack of funds, we had to shut one bus down. So right now, we have just one bus running. It

visits  
two schools  
in the  
morning and  
one school  
at noon every  
day. The bus visits  
sixteen schools in  
the department of

Chimaltenango and La Antigua Guatemala a week, on the same day and same hour every week. Hence, the teachers and the students are aware of what time the bus comes and it becomes a habit to them.

**How much does it cost?**

To sustain one bus \$10,000 per year is needed, with the main expenses being the maintenance of the bus, fuel, the driver's salary and purchasing new books.

**What are your funding sources?**

My Swiss friends generate funds for many of our projects, then there are the book donors. The Spanish school at PROBIGUA helps where we fall short.

**Do you ever think of expanding or are you happy where the organization is now?**

Time flies very quickly. It's been 20 years now. In 5 years, I see more libraries, more buses and more leaders. I want to make a Center of Convergence of Development and Leadership, so that the community is helped and the country can be better. I have new ideas every day. But the biggest thing is

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to give back to my country and community by changing the lives of children and youth through reading, education and books.

**What is your wish for Biblioteca Móvil Bus?**

I want every department in Guatemala to have one. For that, we need more money. I keep getting calls and invitations from so many schools, but I'm just unable to go, as we have limited resources.

**What are the most satisfying parts of your job?**

The most satisfying moment for me is entering a library filled with children and announcing that I have arrived with new books. Also, when we do the statistics at the end of the year and find that 36,000 students entered the mobile library. And finally, when the books are in the hands of the kids.

**Which books do the children like most?**

It's a little bit of everything, *un poco de todo*. The little children just want to see the pictures and they like the comic books with illustrations. But after three or four years, the children discover that questions are answered, and the answers are in a book somewhere. Then, they want history, science or biology. They are fascinated with literature.

**What have been your favorite books?**

I clearly remember my first book was *Barbuchín*; I loved it as a child, but I actually read my first book at age 17. The book that inspires me now is *Todos Remando En La Misma Dirección (Get Everyone in Your Boat Rowing in the Same Direction)* by Bob Boylan.

**Why do you think kids love books so much?**

The kids are ecstatic just to see the books. I remember once one teacher told me, "Rigoberto, these children take these books and waste their time. They don't read them at all." I said that it didn't matter. They just needed to have some contact with the books, to feel the weight, the texture of the books, the glaze of the thick pages, the smell of old

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The teachers and staff at  
PROBIGUA's Spanish School.



Rigoberto Zamora Charuc, the founder of PROBIGUA's Spanish School.

books, to see how different fonts look and how colorful they are. To make the kids love the books before they read them, they need the books in their hands. They need to have an opinion of what they love, what they don't like, what is interesting, what is boring, what is important, etc. They need to develop concepts and choices.

**Any other anecdotes you'd like to share?**

Around 8 or 9 years ago, one kid asked me, "Do you know why I am here?" I said, "No, I have no idea." Then he said, "I am here because I love to read. Other friends of mine like to play and eat, but I like to read." Then I asked him, "But why do you like to read so much?" He replied, "I want to know everything in the world. And, that's possible only when I read." I was so touched with this conversation. And, I keep getting this funny question from teachers, "What country are you from?" It's a funny belief that only foreigners work for the locals here. They don't believe that I am a *guatemalteco* and I am here to help the *chapines*.

**Why did you choose La Antigua?**

After I finished my education, to be honest, I didn't know where to go. I didn't want to go back home and work in the fields like I did as a

child; I just couldn't return to fields to cultivate coffee any more. I knew one skill: carpentry. A friend of mine gave me a job making furniture. La Antigua was an ideal place for people who wanted to work and study. Plus, it's a melting pot of religion, culture, and tourism. Eventually, I met my wife here and got married.

**What do you like most about La Antigua?**

It is very tranquil. People are very amicable. You can walk peacefully here. The weather is always pleasant. And, there is opportunity to work and be successful.

**What would you like to change about La Antigua?**

I don't think there is anything I don't like about being here. It's not perfect, but it's good the way it is.

**Do you think you'll ever write a book?**

Yes, I sure do. The book will be about education and how books and education can change lives.

**What is your philosophy in life?**

Thinking big and making big changes. I keep spreading this philosophy of thinking big. Whenever I talk to the little kids I tell them to think BIG. But, for big ideas to materialize, you need people and you need to take care of small details.

Written by Ajita Chowhan  
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For more information on PROBIGUA, go to [www.probigua.org](http://www.probigua.org).

FOR MORE INTERVIEWS, VISIT [www.grupoquepasa.com](http://www.grupoquepasa.com)

