

VOLUNTARIOS DE OCCIDENTE and the ANDREW FINCH EDUCATION TRUST. ECUADOR
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(www.voluntariosdeoccidente.org; www.afetuk.org)
Newsletter 11. January, 2010

As you all know the year started with many difficulties caused by the attempt by the head teacher at El Porvenir (our main centre) to take over the funds and control without accountability being in place. It was a hard decision for both the directors of VDO and the trustees of AFET to withdraw from the village in which Andrew had died. But we felt that it was the right thing to do. Due to the hard work of Gonzalo and Maria Teresa in making new contacts we were able to continue with our support to VDO in its prime aim of breaking the cycle of rural poverty by means of children's education, improving the diet, health and living conditions. Four of us, from the UK, visited the main centre, Techo Propio in September and we are so pleased to be able to give the following positive report. At the end we shall say something about our Christmas campaign.

PART 1: AFET support to the Computer Centres and Schools

VDO worked directly in two centres, in Techo Propio and in Sangolqui. The first and main centre is located in Techo Propio, a cooperative near Ambato in the Andean highlands. It is a well founded project whose directors positively welcomed the support given. It is intended to draw up a 5 year programme, with an initial period of 2 years. Rooms for both the Andrew Finch Computer Teaching Centre and the Library have been provided by the community. At the teaching centre there are six computers, a printer and a scanner all donated by AFET. A connection to the internet is not possible at the moment. Nine short courses of twenty hours duration, have been run for 30 children and 50 adults in the community, and 70 children from the Techo Propio school have also received classes. With this heavy use, a rolling replacement plan for the equipment is needed and two computers will be bought in the next session. Most courses were delivered by Gonzalo and Maria Teresa, but some locals have shown interest in helping with these. The courses usually include basic concepts, use of programs such as Word, Power Point and Excel, and programs for painting and design. This program will continue.

The second centre is in Sangolqui, near Quito. The head teacher is very enthusiastic and a local coordinator (a university student) has been appointed with financial help from AFET. One of the five computers has been donated by AFET. There is a connection to the internet. 105 children received classes. It is intended to buy a printer and two tables for the centre.

There is a proposed centre in the Amazon Region at Misahualli (Tena) with whom VDO have good communication. This is an isolated indigenous school whose staff have shown great interest in the contacts already made. They have already used the library although book exchange is very time consuming in travel terms. There was an interesting cultural exchange with the Techo Propio school with 62 children and about 20 adults traveling to Tena. Football matches between the schools were arranged and swimming in the Amazon were enjoyed. This outing was funded by a Christmas donation from the Happy Gringo Travel Agency (director John Potts, a friend of Andrew's). The culture, climate and geography in the Amazon region are very different from that of the Andean region and most children have never been outside their own township. To them it was amazing. The help to this school will be increased in January 2010. It has 254 students.

The computers in the VDO office in Ambato are connected to the internet and are used two or three days a week by secondary school children from the El Porvenir-Acapulco region (where AFET and VDO were previously based) for research projects set by the school. However, electricity cuts have caused problems. A replacement computer is to be bought

There are basic shortages in the Techo Propio school's construction as was seen by the visitors in September, with lack of windows and doors in two classrooms (bear in mind the freezing temperatures at

9,000 feet altitude), and no wash hand basins and doors on the lavatories. AFET will be providing money for the doors and windows for the classrooms. The head teacher has obtained funding for lavatory equipment. Because of the difficulties at the beginning of the year the original 'pen friend' project lapsed. However, the children in Sangolqui School want to continue and the teachers and parents in Techo Propio would like to start in January. It is really hoped that the correspondence with Knaphill Lower School can continue. There is also a new initiative in schools. Children are electing a "children's government" with the aim of promoting cultural and ecological projects. In the school at Tena, the student council is promoting a native dancing group and a greenhouse. Supporting such projects would be a good destination of money sent by children in England.

Other activities

The visit of AFET representatives in September was a very important event for VDO, the schools and communities. This also enabled the holding of a festival and party in honour of Andrew which was much enjoyed and appreciated. He would have enjoyed the dancing and food!

Secondary school expenses

This fund is new, and is needed because some of the sponsored children have now gone on to secondary school and there are other children, including siblings, whose parents are struggling with the expense involved. The actual education is free, but the ancillary costs of uniform, stationery & books, fares etc is substantial. It is hoped to find suitable secondary school pupils who will help with the work in the centres and the library in exchange for assistance with their school expenses.

2: AFET SUPPORT TO THE CHILDRENS' LIBRARY

There are 17 groups with 288 members. These members are in schools in Sangolqui, Techo Propio and Tena. There are also family groups in Ambato and in El Porvenir-Acapulco.

There are now 1022 books and 100 magazines in the library. 100 Spanish language books were bought, 40 stories written by the children were edited and 120 used books were donated. A dozen classic English language children's stories were bought by AFET and delivered directly. 14 books were repaired.

In Techo Propio the new headquarters of the library is well established and was officially opened by Adrienne Finch on her visit in September. The cooperative has put new floor slabs both the library and the Computer Centre. Children over the age of 10 in Techo Propio have started to use the library. A projector for use with either DVD or computer has been bought and now movies and educational films are shown twice a month. It will also be used to support teaching.

Sangoliqui children are, as usual, enthusiastic users, a storage space has been given by the school directors, and a reading contest was held in November.

Diana, the home grown author, continues writing. Some of the titles are 'The seed which didn't want to grow', and 'The tree which gave advice'. It is hoped that other children will be encouraged to write their own stories too.

The books had to be taken by boat to the school at Tena. It is intended to open a library space in the New Year and to give an initial stock of books to save on travel time.

Part 3. CHILD SPONSORSHIP-Taitakuna Programme www.taitakuna.org

Fourteen children are directly sponsored, but siblings in the involved families obviously also benefit, giving a total of thirty six children. Eight sponsors are from the AFET group in England, five are former volunteers, relatives and friends in England, USA and Canada. In addition, five more children in Techo

Propio and two in El Porvenir-Acapulco received some help from VDO in the hope of finding a sponsor next year (*We now know that there are two more sponsors!*).

Nine of the supported children study in secondary school, 25 in primary and two in the kindergarten. Help is given for uniforms, school supplies and in some cases with transport. Five secondary school students received extra English Language classes. In general all had good performance at school and are happy to continue.

There was a monthly meeting for each the two groups, with the children and at least one of their parents (usually the mother) present. 105 food parcels were distributed. These included rice, semolina flour, pasta, flour (bean, wheat & pea) and oats. An additional contribution from AFET was made so that sardines and lentils could continue to be included, (these two protein items had become too expensive to be covered by the normal sponsorship fee). The sponsorship fee has now been increased to \$30/month to allow for the inflation of food costs. A special distribution of extra food was made at Christmas. AFET pays for the transport of the el Porvenir-Acapulco group to the Ambato office for the meetings.

Two clothing sales were organized thanks to generous donations from John Potts (Happy Gringo) and from the sponsors' visit in September. A fashion show was also organized. The models were girls from the community and the clothes came from a donation of a big factory in Colombia.

Part 4 Health Fund. In Techo Propio and El Porvenir-Acapulco all children had to have a medical examination and these were paid for by AFET. A sponsored child with pyelonephritis continues to need support. In Techo Propio, partly because of the climate, three young children had to have consultations and treatment for bronchitis. The fund also paid for glasses for a child and her mother, and for a consultation for a teenager with gynaecological problems. Without the fund little of this medical help would be possible and the families are really grateful as it is a great load off their minds.

Part 5. House Construction Fund: a bathroom was completed in a house which is used by three families with their children, a total of 15 people benefit. Each family helps to pay for the materials and provided labour. The fund also paid for water and waste connections, labour and materials for the bathroom of a widow with three young children. The fund will continue to support this work.

Conclusion: It was rewarding to see that three children started secondary school and they were reminded that four years ago parents usually said secondary school would not be possible because of lack of money. It is also pleasing that the group in El Porvenir-Acapulco continues, despite the difficulties. The new group in Techo Propio have integrated well into the programme.

The Christmas fund raising campaign with the sale of cards and notelets was again successful. 2,750 cards were sold raising, with Christmas donations, about £2,300. This is approximately half of the amount we need each year to support the work of VDO. So any additional fund raising events or donations are really welcome. Last year one of the trustees did a sponsored climb and raised about one thousand pounds and this made our account much healthier!!

The trustees of AFET and the directors of VDO are only too aware of the enormous burden of poverty in many countries and that what we do is a drop in the ocean. But the direct help we can give, with a relatively small amount of money making a big difference to a community is a reward. Ensuring that charitable donations are well spent with little going on administration is one of our guiding principles.

The children, parents, the VDO directors and AFET trustees are truly grateful to all our supporters.