Brothers supply books to 10% of Guatemala’s kids

You’re sitting in your cubicle, it’s the middle of the afternoon. You’re staring out the window, daydreaming about leaving your corporate job behind to pursue your dream of helping people in a far-off land. Then reality sets in. What about leases, car payments, the corporate ladder? Joe and Jeff Berninger made the leap and left corporate America behind more than 12 years ago to follow a dream of helping others.

In the early '90s, Joe had taken a leave of absence from his marketing job at IBM to embark on a trip around the world. Then, Jeff left his systems analyst position at Procter & Gamble for a project publishing textbooks in native languages in Guatemala. Both brothers had visited and become captivated by the rich indigenous culture in the Central American country.

Today, they run Cooperative for Education, a nonprofit with a $1.8 million budget that supplies textbooks to 10 percent of Guatemalan schoolchildren. Guatemala, a country of about 13 million, has an illiteracy rate of 70 percent in rural areas, according to CoEd. About 90 percent of schools don’t have books.

The nonprofit started informally in one school, in a town called La Labor, and helped 180 kids.

“We started with one subject, math,” Jeff, 39, said. “People said, ‘That’s never going to work, they’re never going to return the books’.” That first year, 98 percent of the books were returned, and almost as many are returned today, though they now help more than 25,000 secondary school students. Rather than donate books, CoEd sets up a cash generating textbook library and computer center programs within schools. Students pay a nominal fee, which helps keep the program running. CoEd is thriving in its second decade – a major feat for nonprofits, the brothers say – and with headquarters in Oakley and Guatemala City, they employ 30 people, with three more positions being created in their local office.

“IT took a number of years to get the program up and gives it the solidity it needed to run on its own,” said Jeff, who lives in Green Township. For the first five years, family members and friends thought they’d return to corporate life when they wanted to settle down. Both brothers have gotten married (Jeff even met his wife, Johanna, in Guatemala), had kids and grew the organization.

Family life has changed their roles. Jeff now spends three months a year in Guatemala, and Joe – who focuses on fundraising in North America – spends about three weeks there. They rely on private donations, with Rotary International clubs being their No. 1 donors. Jeff’s former employer, P&G, provided the funding grant, and other local companies, including Chiquita, have donated over the years. They also take donors on tours of Guatemala twice a year – to tour the country and to deliver books.

“Early on, we realized we needed to build our base, we needed to get people to go down and see the kids and see our schools,” said Joe, who lives in Mount Lookout.

Spending time in Guatemala puts all those daily life stresses in perspective, said Jeff. And the mission is not just to change the lives of students but to change the lives of donors as well.”

Eighth of every dollar donated goes straight to the programs. “We never take anything for granted, but every year the organization gets a little more solid,” said Joe, 40.

For more information on Cooperative for Education, visit www.coeduc.org.

Know someone in the Greater Cincinnati and Northern Kentucky area who has found passion in his or her work? Contact freelance writer and editor Stephanie Romine at stephanieromine@yahoo.com or 859-640-2127.

— By Erin Conroy, The Associated Press