

Springfield businessman encourages students in rural Nicaragua

Written by Roger Ray FOR THE NEWS-LEADER

March 22, 2012

Inside a small school building made of mud and sticks, 18 students crowd into the San Pedro school in rural Nicaragua. Their morning class is taught by a government-provided teacher but in the afternoon they are tutored by three teenagers who are recipients of scholarships to attend high school. There are several necessary elements to helping a very poor nation to rise out of poverty but among the most crucial is education.

As we are seeing in the Middle East and Central Africa, rural Central America is still held back by a high illiteracy rate that keeps the children of the poor locked into a cycle of never-ending poverty as part-time agricultural employees. At village after village, Rainbow Network founder and Springfield businessman Keith Jaspers interacts with the students, encouraging them to study hard and to stay in school.

When he encounters a school where the students are not being properly resourced and challenged to learn, Jaspers initiates very

probing and possibly demanding conversations with the staff about not letting their standards fall. Academic achievement is the only path towards breaking out of poverty for most of these children and they have no greater advocate than Jaspers. The high school students who receive small monthly stipends to help them attend high school are expected to give back to their community through working as assistants to the visiting physicians or, most likely, tutoring in the afternoon school sessions.



Keith Jaspers, Rainbow Network founder, speaks in San Pedro. / Submitted photo

More than 800 students currently receive scholarships through the Rainbow Network and that many more remain on waiting lists in hopes of new sponsors who will pay the \$300 per year that it takes to send a student to high school.

Many of the students nearing completion of their high school education express hopes of going on to college so that they could

become secondary school teachers, engineers, agricultural specialists, nurses and doctors. Many clearly have the motivation and the intelligence to achieve their goals if only they are given the opportunity to further their education.

About The Rainbow Network

Keith Jaspers, founder of the Rainbow Network, a non-governmental organization doing relief work in Nicaragua, was recently called back out of retirement to give direction to the Rainbow Network as they attempt to rebuild their donor base. Roger Ray is a former board member of the Rainbow Network and a regular contributor to the News-Leader. The two are traveling together in Nicaragua this week, visiting some of the more than 100 rural villages served by the Rainbow Network. Ray will be submitting stories about their travels this week.