

**Fundraising Event! For those of you who live in or near Montclair, New Jersey, a fundraising race is being organized by middle school students to help fund the kindergarten sponsored by the Mojanda Foundation in rural Ecuador. If you are interested in participating, sponsoring a runner or pledging a matching grant, please email us at [mojanda@uio.telconet.net](mailto:mojanda@uio.telconet.net). Please read on for more information about this project.**

## **Creating A Child-oriented Approach to Early Childhood Education in Mojandita, Ecuador: A Volunteer's Perspective**

Through the support of The Mojanda Foundation, our little rural community of Mojandita de Curuvi, has had a kindergarten for seven years now. This year, the kindergarten, named the Betti Sachs Kindergarten, has 21 students between three and five years old. As Mojandita is an indigenous, rural community, the kindergarten children also show their Otavalan roots; about half of the kindergarteners are indigenous Otavalans while the other half are mestizos, meaning of mixed indigenous and European ancestry. Many speak Quichua in addition to Spanish. The parents are subsistence-level farmers, who have many times expressed their desire for the improved education of their children. Since families here have very scarce economic resources, it has been difficult to realize many of the improvements that they seek. It is an important community and Mojanda Foundation goal to improve the educational process and experience for the children of Mojandita.



In establishing the kindergarten, Betti and Diego have tried to focus on the pedagogy of Maria Montessori whose approach to early childhood education has earned worldwide acclaim. Montessori-style education is based on providing children with a relaxed but structured environment in which each child has the independence to choose and direct many of their daily educational activities. The children are permitted to choose their own

materials and activities during at least a good portion of the school day, with the guidance of their teachers whenever needed. Allowing children this level of independence is contrary to the rigid, rote- memorization required by traditional curricula. In addition, these regimented methods discourage creativity and critical thinking. It is easy to think of times in our own schooling in which it felt good to be able to decide what and how to do a certain project or classroom assignment. Oftentimes, children in rural public schools in Ecuador are reprimanded for using their own creative ideas and solutions when they do not produce an identical result to that which the teacher requires.





In order to continue to integrate more Montessori philosophy, creativity and child-oriented education into the kindergarten, a number of things are needed. All kindergartens need materials and this is certainly the case in a Montessori classroom. Along with allowing children the opportunity to initiate their own school activities, Montessori-style education requires having access to enough well-designed and durable hands-on materials for the children to choose from and to be able to vary these offerings over the school year. Additionally, the kindergarten is in constant need of very basic materials

such as notebooks, paper, pencils, markers, paints, crayons and books. The yearly purchase of school supplies is very costly for poor families, many of whom earn little more than one hundred dollars a month. In some regions, children do not attend school because their families cannot buy the required supplies.

Another very important part of changing the rigid educational model is providing teacher training. The teachers here in the countryside have been educated in the traditional memorization-based system already described, even though they are interested in learning about the alternative approaches described in the new education law. It is very difficult for a teacher to feel comfortable and in control in a Montessori classroom when they have not been previously taught how to interact with children in this type of setting. Thus, training programs for the kindergarten teachers are necessary in order to allow the teachers to feel that they can effectively utilize the child-oriented techniques of Montessori education.



Your financial contributions will greatly assist in providing both materials and teacher training. Your dollars will go a long way here and your assistance will help advance the ongoing project of improving the quality of education of the children here in Mojandita de Curuvi.

By Benjamin Goldstein, March, 2004, Mojandita, Ecuador

*(After graduating Brown University in 2003, Ben has been volunteering with the Mojanda Foundation for the 2003-2004 school year, teaching kindergarten, English and basic computers skills to the children of Mojandita.)*