

# How a 50-cent donation has helped 10,000 children and built 26 classrooms in Nicaragua

By Tom Affleck

It's spring and the road to Monte Olivo in northwest Nicaragua is washed away with heavy rains. According to our director of operations, we cannot get through, even with 4X4s, to reach the construction site. Three members of the SchoolBOX construction team, stationed at the site, continue to advance with the four-classroom school building project. However, if we don't get this road fixed, the 11-member Canadian volunteer team and much-needed building materials won't be getting through.

SchoolBOX, a Canadian charity dedicated to "making education possible," has built 26 classrooms and is helping more than 10,000 children go to school in Nicaragua. SchoolBOX began in 2006 after I gave a notebook and a pencil to two young girls, Sandra and Yessenia, in the north of the country.

Upon seeing these simple gifts, one girl's father beamed and said: "Now that you have a notebook and a pencil, you can go to school this year." His words sparked the dream that became SchoolBOX.

Having worked in international development in Guatemala, Peru and Nicaragua, I can honestly say that I had never seen anything like it: 50 cents worth of school supplies were going to empower a child to get a basic education. The two girls don't understand, of course, that they were the catalysts who ultimately empowered thousands of children to get an education in their country.

One day, as we're bouncing along the dirt roads, the thought occurs to me that perhaps our guide knows the one person that I remember from that experience. "Do you know Vicente Padilla?" I ask. The guide says he does. Later, near a cluster of small shacks, we meet Sandra and Yessenia. We learn that Yessenia dreams of becoming a doctor and Sandra is striving to be a veterinarian.

Despite having no start-up capital, and no government funding to date, SchoolBOX has flourished as an organization. Out of necessity, we have become great penny-pinchers. SchoolBOX does not pay for office space in Canada (thanks to Sleep Country Canada), bases key management positions in Nicaragua rather than Canada (a huge saving in salaries) and remains fo-



The Shirley Case School in Monte Olivo in rural northwestern Nicaragua now holds classes for 118 students.

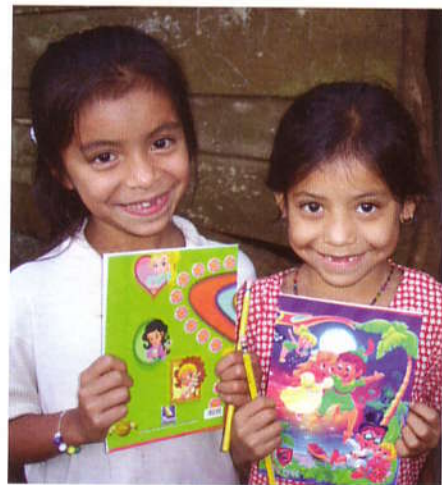
cused on simple, cost-effective programs.

But back to the floods in the spring of this year: With the clock ticking, we decide to purchase transport-truck loads of rock and earth to fix the road. Last year, road access to the Monte Olivo community, where 118 children are now awaiting the completion of their new school, was cut off for three months due to the rains. So waiting for the municipal government to repair the road simply isn't an option.

In the end, with the help of community members, we repair the road for less than \$300. While it looks more like an ATV track than a road for a few kilometres, it is passable. Our collective relief is tangible as we confirm construction will be complete for a school inauguration the next weekend.

The four-classroom school, which includes a sports area and three latrines, will cost \$50,000. A civil engineer is overseeing the project and the construction exceeds the building code. We've taken numerous steps to strengthen the building for earthquakes. For \$5 each, SchoolBOX will also provide educational supplies to every student and teacher in the school. Our goal is to hand out 12,000 packages in our Nicaraguan partner schools in 2011.

By the time it was complete, more than 55 Canadians had travelled to Nicaragua to help build this school. Hundreds more Canadians have generously donated money and goods to the project. The school will be named in honour of Shirley Case, a remarkable Canadian aid



The two girls who sparked the charity, Yessenia and Sandra.

worker who was tragically killed in Afghanistan in 2008. Shirley's compassion led her to serve children in impoverished regions worldwide. That compassion will continue to shine as 118 children attend classes in their new school.

The project is proof that ordinary Canadians can have an impact, can make a difference and can change the world.

Tom Affleck is president of SchoolBOX Inc., an Ottawa Valley-based charity which builds schools, provides school supplies and runs sports programs for students in Central America. See [www.schoolbox.ca](http://www.schoolbox.ca) for more information.