

Mexican Organization Awarded Prize for Bringing Information and Technology to Remote, Indigenous Communities

Computer and Internet Training on All-Terrain Buses Helps Some of Mexico's Poorest People Gain Educational, Economic Opportunities

SEATTLE – The Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation today presented its 2008 Access to Learning Award of US\$1 million to the Vasconcelos Program in Mexico's Veracruz state for its innovative efforts to connect people to information and knowledge through free access to computers, the Internet, and training. The organization is being honored for bringing these tools and services to rural, indigenous communities using all-terrain vehicles equipped with technology classrooms. Microsoft, a foundation partner in efforts to help public libraries connect people with online information, will also contribute to the Vasconcelos Program by providing software and technology training curriculum through its applicable programs.

Created and managed by the Veracruz secretary of public education, Vasconcelos targets communities where state and federal authorities have provided computers in public spaces such as schools and community centers but the equipment remains severely underused because residents lack basic computer skills. A bus and training team spends up to two weeks in each village providing computer literacy and other training to people of all ages. Prior to each visit, Vasconcelos works with local leaders to make sure the training meets each community's needs and identifies support so the centers can continue these services.

Since 2005, Vasconcelos' fleet of 24 all-terrain vehicles—each equipped with computers, satellite Internet connections, and a team of experienced trainers—has supported more than 120,000 people in more than 200 communities. These are among Mexico's poorest areas, where many people face difficult health and economic conditions and have education levels far below the national average. To address some of these challenges, Vasconcelos devises a curriculum and outreach activities tailored to the needs of each community. A typical curriculum combines technology literacy training and community-specific activities, such as health education, cultural preservation, and indigenous art and dance projects.

“When people understand the world of opportunity they can find through computers and the Internet, they are inspired to learn 21st century technology skills,” said Dr. Victor Arredondo, Veracruz's secretary of public education and founder of the Vasconcelos Program. “Many of the communities we visit are initially hesitant to embrace information technology, but we remove this barrier by tailoring our programs to meet local economic, health, and educational needs, and ensuring our approach aligns with the indigenous cultures in which we work.”

Vasconcelos has enabled new economic and educational opportunities for many people, including Flavia Esmira Vázquez Rivera, an artist, entrepreneur, and mother of three living in Coxquihui. After enrolling her sons in Vasconcelos' training program, Vázquez was inspired to learn how online resources could help her build her small jewelry-making business. She learned how to use the Internet and computers to improve her marketing efforts. As a result, her contribution to her family's income has increased by 25 percent.

The program has also helped open economic opportunities for more than 6,500 small-scale coffee farmers in Veracruz's burgeoning coffee-growing region. In 2007, the organization taught the farmers how to monitor coffee prices online so they could sell their crops for the highest prices. The coffee producers say that access to the online resources, including information about loans for fertilizers and seeds, will reduce the need for a "middle man" and maximize their earnings.

Vasconcelos works to sustain the benefits that people and communities gain through using technology by encouraging local leaders to continue funding access. For example, Evaristo Gaona Zaleta, an elementary school principal in Coxquihui, worked with Vasconcelos to get state funding to buy new software and computers for the community's modest digital center, which offers free computer and Internet access.

"Thanks to Vasconcelos' support and the increased access to technology in our community, we are making education in our schools more effective and meaningful for our children," said Gaona.

The foundation's annual Access to Learning Award, now in its ninth year, recognizes the innovative efforts of libraries and similar organizations outside the United States in providing free access to computers and the Internet. It is awarded by Global Libraries, a special initiative of the foundation's Global Development Program, which works to create opportunities for people to lift themselves out of poverty and hunger. More information about the award can be found at www.gatesfoundation.org/ATLA.

"Vasconcelos is transforming people's lives by bringing information, knowledge, and hope to communities," said William H. Gates Sr., co-chair of the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation, who announced this year's award at a ceremony in Québec, Canada. "Its work is providing new opportunities for people young and old to improve the quality of their lives and ensure a better future for their families. I hope Vasconcelos' example will encourage more organizations and governments to provide greater access to information and technology for those most in need."

Vasconcelos will use the Access to Learning Award funds to reach more people with additional vehicles, more trainings, and ongoing technical support.

In a separate initiative, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation has been working with Mexico's federal and state governments since 2002 to help provide free access to computers, the Internet, and training in one-third of the country's public libraries.

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About the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation

Guided by the belief that every life has equal value, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation works to help all people lead healthy, productive lives. In developing countries, it focuses on improving people's health and giving them the chance to lift themselves out of hunger and extreme poverty. In the United States, it seeks to ensure that all people—especially those with the fewest resources—have access to the opportunities they need to succeed in school and life. Based in Seattle, the foundation is led by CEO Patty Stonesifer and Co-chair William H. Gates Sr., under the direction of Bill and Melinda Gates and Warren Buffett.