



*photo by Bart Nagel*

Fifteen years later and I still remember the selection weekend, the fundraising, the trip, the orientation, the work and the intense, lasting satisfaction I feel for having done something profoundly good and profoundly enriching.

My first project in Costa Rica 1992 was to spend a few weeks rebuilding trails in a high-altitude cloud forest reserve called Vulcan Barva. The jaguars in the woods, the mist sinking slowly into the caldera of the volcano on Christmas morning, the solitude of sitting in the woods with a shovel and a pickaxe, clearing brush from the trail and digging the drainage trenches -- the camaraderie of New Years Eve in the village, singing at midnight, arms flung around our shoulders, the stars glittering in their millions overhead.

The main project was building a one-room schoolhouse in a tiny village near the Nicaraguan border called Cano Rito. The project had been arranged by the village headman, Pablo, who, like his neighbours, was a Nicaraguan war-refugee -- we were so close to the Nicaraguan border that you could practically see it, and there were disused Contra airstrips in the bush nearby.

Pablo -- a farmer -- had aspirations for his village. The school was run by teachers who were required -- by law -- to do one year in the bush as repayment for their loans. Pablo thought that if he could build superior facilities -- first a concrete school, then a concrete teacher's house, then a flush toilet, running

water for a cooking sink, and so on -- he could lure one of these new teachers to stay year after year, giving the kids the benefit of a teacher with more than theoretical experience, saving them from being the test subjects for the tentative experiments of year after year's waves of recent graduates.

The kids were -- incredible. Balls of machete-wielding, tree-climbing, laughing energy. In the way, underfoot, hilarious and inspirational and frustrating. We'd sit up at night with them while the candle-lanterns burned and talk about the world, about geography, about snow, about monkeys and picking coffee and every subject imaginable.

The work was ridiculous. Every drop of water for our cement came up out of a well in a bucket on a rope -- not even a crank handle. Every handful of sand had to be separated from river-muck that was filled with gravel and leaves and whatnot, using huge chicken-wire sifting screens (the chickens ran free, needing to be chased out of our open-air kitchen thrice daily). The gravel started life as huge volcanic boulders, hauled in by oxen, then broken up with hammers (not sledge hammers -- HAMMERS!) into gravel-sized peas.

And when the school stood, complete and smooth, painted and plastered, it was the most tangible, satisfying thing I'd ever done.

I went back to the village ten years later, and they had electricity, a flush toilet, a sink, a road -- all thanks to Pablo and the skills he learned getting YCI involved in his cause. The kids were still maddening and delightful --

-- and the teachers were there for their third year in a row.

Cory Doctorow  
YCI CR 92

Cory Doctorow ([craphound.com](http://craphound.com)) is a science fiction novelist, blogger and technology activist. He is the co-editor of the popular weblog Boing Boing ([boingboing.net](http://boingboing.net)), and a contributor to Wired, Popular Science, Make, the New York Times, and many other newspapers, magazines and websites. He was formerly Director of European Affairs for the Electronic Frontier Foundation ([eff.org](http://eff.org)), a non-profit civil liberties group that defends freedom in technology law, policy, standards and treaties. In that capacity, he worked to balance international treaties, policies and standards on copyright and related rights, advocating in the halls of governments, the United Nations, standards bodies, corporations, universities and non-profits. In 2006/2007, he served as the Fulbright Chair at the Annenberg Center for Public Diplomacy at the University of Southern California. His novels are published by Tor Books and simultaneously released on the Internet under Creative Commons licenses that encourage their re-use and sharing, a move that increases his sales by enlisting his readers to help promote his work. He co-founded the open source peer-to-peer software company OpenCola, sold to OpenText, Inc in 2003, and presently serves on the boards and advisory boards of the Participatory Culture Foundation, the MetaBrainz Foundation, Technorati, Inc, and Onion Networks, Inc.