

Lovett students out to preserve region in Ecuador; [Home Edition]

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Abstract (Document Summary)

The program began in 1990 after [Bob Braddy] and his wife, Connie, also a [Lovett] teacher, persuaded Lovett's ecology club to raise funds for rebuilding Santa Rosa's school. The couple were so impressed by the biologically diverse region, called the Intag, with its rare orchids and amphibians, they persuaded Lovett to buy property near the town for establishing a government-protected reserve. Since 1996, nearly 500 high school and college students, professors and researchers have visited Siempre Verde, which means "always green" in Spanish. Its small research station and dormitory, which Lovett built, has hot water but no electricity. It is surrounded by gardens and is so remote it's accessible only by foot. Well-maintained hiking trails allow visitors to see and touch flora and fauna that thrive at cloud forest elevations of 7,000 to 11,000 feet.

At Lovett, one means for supporting the Santa Rosans has been the sale of shade-grown coffee from the region. The students have generated more than \$3,000 at \$15 a pound from selling the Cafe Rio Intag and T-shirts to buy a truck to transport 14 youths to a nearby high school. On their own, [Paul Merz] and [David Pulliam] are also selling the coffee to raise money for revisiting Ecuador in the spring.

Photo Lovett students have rebuilt this Santa Rosa school, purchased looms for weaving and provided classroom supplies. / Courtesy of David Pulliam Photo Paul Merz and David Pulliam, shown in the Ecuadorean cloud forest, started Friends of Siempre Verde. / Courtesy of Paul Merz Photo Rare orchids and amphibians thrive in the biologically diverse region called the Intag. / Bob Braddy Photo A giant monkey frog keeps the attention of Lovett School students David Pulliam and Paul Merz and [Dorothy Fuqua], a major benefactor of both the Atlanta Botanical Garden and the Buckhead school. / NICK ARROYO / Staff

Full Text (1017 words)

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High in Ecuador's cloud forests, a biological hot spot threatened with extinction, Atlanta high school students are savoring a rare outdoor classroom --- and doing their part to change the world.

For about a decade, Lovett School students and scholars from around the world have traveled to a 500-acre cloud forest preserve established there by the school to conduct plant and animal research. They've also taught poor residents of nearby Santa Rosa alternative uses of their land than mining and timber, which have all but decimated the environment. And they've rebuilt a dilapidated school, purchased looms for weaving and provided much-needed classroom supplies.

Now, the Buckhead independent school is out to create a \$500,000 endowment for the preserve, unusual for a U.S. school. In doing so, the students --- led by two entrepreneurial seniors --- are learning lessons in philanthropy, commerce and marketing as they help steer a campaign to raise \$250,000 toward that goal.

"It is very unusual for students to be involved at this level with a fund-raising committee like this, but our headmaster insisted on it," says Lovett science teacher Bob Braddy, who founded the preserve known as Siempre Verde.

Last year, the two students, Paul Merz and David Pulliam, started Friends of Siempre Verde, a club for promoting awareness of the preserve. This year, they helped sell Dorothy Fuqua, one of their school's staunchest benefactors, on backing their efforts. She's pledged up to \$250,000 toward the endowment, a challenge grant for which the school must raise a dollar-for-dollar match.

"When they told me what they wanted to do, I thought it sounded like a wonderful, worthwhile project,"

Fuqua says. "What they're doing there is truly amazing."

The program began in 1990 after Braddy and his wife, Connie, also a Lovett teacher, persuaded Lovett's ecology club to raise funds for rebuilding Santa Rosa's school. The couple were so impressed by the biologically diverse region, called the Intag, with its rare orchids and amphibians, they persuaded Lovett to buy property near the town for establishing a government-protected reserve. Since 1996, nearly 500 high school and college students, professors and researchers have visited Siempre Verde, which means "always green" in Spanish. Its small research station and dormitory, which Lovett built, has hot water but no electricity. It is surrounded by gardens and is so remote it's accessible only by foot. Well-maintained hiking trails allow visitors to see and touch flora and fauna that thrive at cloud forest elevations of 7,000 to 11,000 feet.

"The most startling thing you first see is all this land that has been clear cut, then the station and how incredibly beautiful it is," says Merz, who first visited two summers ago, raising the money by mowing lawns.

Siempre Verde stands out like an oasis because less than 10 percent of the area's once abundant forests remain, Braddy says, thanks to mining and timber interests.

For that reason, a major goal of the program has been to make residents less economically dependent on those industries by teaching them alternatives. One is to reproduce orchids, bromeliads and other plants that can be sold commercially.

Enter the Atlanta Botanical Garden, which for years has visited Ecuador to purchase orchids and collect seed from rare plants through another program there. Back home at its Midtown greenhouses, the staff aims to eventually reintroduce many endangered orchid species to the wild. Its work also includes cataloging the Ecuadorean rain forest's frog population, threatened by loss of habitat and a deadly fungus.

Both Merz and Pulliam, who first interned in the garden's plant tissue lab, are participating in that research, which includes studying poison dart frogs in captivity.

The botanical garden's partnership with Lovett has proved a natural fit: For the school, horticulturists have identified about 100 species of plants growing near its research station, says Ron Gagliardo, the garden's tropical plants curator. In exchange, his staff gains access to an exotic outdoor laboratory, complete with lodging.

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"Shade-grown coffee is such a great economic alternative to the mining . . . we feel like the more we can buy from them and sell, the better off these residents will be," says Merz, 17.

Pulliam, 18, adds, "It also should be influential with the government, once they see they're producing revenues from growing it."

Because of their enthusiasm, the two seniors were asked --- in an unprecedented move --- to join an endowment steering committee of faculty, alumni and prominent community supporters charged with raising funds to match Fuqua's gift by the end of 2005.

"These students are very dedicated to the project," says Fuqua. She and her husband, J.B. Fuqua, are chief benefactors of both Lovett and the botanical garden. "You just never know, from a medicinal

benefit, what can come of plant research like this."

In the meantime, the overriding goal is that Siempre Verde be held in perpetuity.

"We're not just there to provide an environmental education to the people who live there but are deeply involved with the community," Braddy says. "We've just begun to mine the gold there."

[Illustration]

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Credit: STAFF