Sister Cities Use Comics to Build Understanding

One year ago, in the Autumn of 2008, the Henniker-San Ramón Sister Community Project began to use a new tool to build cultural bridges of friendship and understanding between the children of New Hampshire and Nicaragua: comic books. The Henniker-San Ramón Comics Exchange now facilitates



and provides professional networking opportunities between educators, librarians, and artists working in the communities.

The process begins with a workshop for participants in the sister communities. Individual students then begin their drawing and writing projects in collaboration with teachers. The comics are

economically reproduced and copied and then read at family/community events. The students work on translating their work so that the comics are bilingual and they are then exchanged between participating schools in Henniker and San Ramón. The program aims to train teachers in using comics techniques in their classrooms, and conducting independent exchanges between schools. The home-made comics portray similarities and differences between participating communities and cultures,

leading participants to a better understanding of both local and

comics-based cultural exchange between students and families in

the sister communities of Henniker, New Hampshire, and San Ramón, Nicaragua. Participants work together to produce original

comic books about their communities, self-publish and translate the comics, and share them with each other, with their community members, and with their peers in their sister community. The program also encourages and supports educational delegations,

global solidarity and community.

Henniker native Marek Bennett started the workshops through his school-based Comics Workshop

programs. Each student's comic tells a unique story about the community of Henniker or of San Ramón. "Anybody can do comics," says Bennett. "You don't need lots of money or a studio. You don't even need any experience!" "The stories these kids can tell will reach across cultures and languages to make real, human contact," Bennett predicts. Bennett has been a member of two separate Henniker-San Ramón delegations in the past. He currently teaches comics all over New England, plus music and Spanish at the Hopkinton Independent School, and draws the awardwinning comic strip, "Mimi's Doughnuts" for New England newspapers.



Henniker students present their work to the community.

The Henniker-San Ramón Sister Community Project has facilitated social justice and humanitarian aid projects between Henniker and San Ramón since 1993. Past projects include drinking water projects, hurricane relief construction brigades, funding for elementary schools and childcare centers, and training

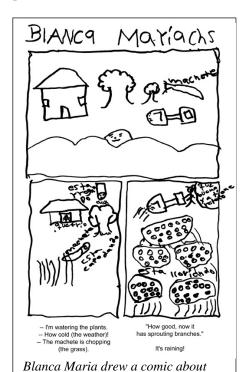


Students in San Ramón, Nicaragua, begin to draw comics.

for public school teachers in San Ramón. The group raises funds by selling fair-trade Nicaraguan coffee beans in Henniker.

In Fall 2008, after the Henniker students drew their comics, Spanish language students from nearby John Stark Regional High School assisted in translating them into Spanish. The group then shared the comics with the town of Henniker in January 2009 at a public reading attended also by a visiting teen delegation from San Ramón and nearby Matagalpa. The Nicaraguan and New Hampshire students drew some bilingual comics together, and the Nicaraguan students presented photo

slideshows and folk dances from their communities before touring the town of Henniker, decked out in parkas and snow boots.



farming.

Then, over the course of two weeks in February, 2009, Bennett and others from Henniker visited six different rural and village schools in San Ramón and worked with around 150 students. Students created pages of comics about local labor, folk tales, important safety and justice issues, and their "pasatiempos" (favorite hobbies and activities), to share with their sister community. Each student received a mini-comic created by a young artist from Henniker as part of the international comics exchange. The project is now compiling and translating over 120 pages of comics from the students of San Ramón to make them available to students in Henniker.

For more information:

On the Henniker-San Ramón Comics Exchange: http://www.marekbennett.com/comicsworkshop/ (click on sidebar)

On the Henniker-San Ramón Sister Community Project: http://hennikersanRamón.org
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