

Maestras Voluntarias Transcript (English)

00:53 – Ana Débora Mola: The most needy classes, the rural people, were completely illiterate in Cuba. So we went with the first contingent of about 1500 young people

01:29 - Flora Belkis Lescaille:: The rebel army and the peasants had already begun to become literate in the different areas where we were.

01:44 - Flora Belkis Lescaille:: We graduated as volunteer teachers and immediately started to take a census and to build schools. They weren't modern schools built by brigades. We built the schools ourselves with local resources.

02:15 - Narrator: *They worked without rest for five days until the school was built entirely and named it for a hero from the distant city.*

02:27- Ana Débora Mola: When we arrived to our destination in the Sierra Maestra, we were placed at different campsites.

02:58- Flora Belkis Lescaille: No bathrooms, no real houses. For housing, it was a rustic campsite we improvised. The school where we would teach did not exist yet, we had to build it ourselves. One of the objectives was precisely to get us ready for those adverse conditions so we didn't have any comforts. We taught under the trees, sitting on branches as our furniture. Our house was a hammock they gave us with a plastic covering, I remember that I couldn't use it...

I got wet all the time, I couldn't figure out how to put the plastic on. You had to place the hammock and put a stick in the middle and then the plastic on top to shelter us from the rain. And it rained every day. A lot of work, because everything was all youth, joy and fun, because we were happy, even though we were away from our families.

It rained day and night. When we ate, the water would rain down on the food tray, mixing up all the rice, the beans, the slice of guava and that is how we ate in that situation.

04:50- Ana Débora Mola: The students became really connected to us as if they had known us for a very long time

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05:01-Flora Belkis Lescaille: Some of us lived at the school, but some others, women, for example, like me, who was a very young girl, lived at a local farmer's house and we helped them economically and shared the chores like a member of the family.

05:20-Ana Débora Mola: They said: "Oh, no, you can't leave here!" "No, no, no! You are from here now!" Because there was so much work to do and we didn't care whether it was Saturday or Sunday. We were with them constantly.

We also visited them in their houses, converse with them. Got to know the family, the grandparents.

05:45- Flora Belkis Lescaille: Those farmers we lived with became part of our family. Still today, I visit those farmers from more than 47 years ago. In the house where we stayed, we became part of the family So when our parents came to visit us to see how we were doing, they left very happy after seeing we were so welcome, and taken care of, and that we felt delighted with life.

In my case, they were both lovely families in the two places where I lived.

06:35- Flora Belkis Lescaille: We improvised and sometimes students wrote on leaves if the notebooks did not arrive on time. The content of the class was Arithmetic, Spanish and Civics; We taught them different subjects. We taught classes to children in the morning, the older kids in the afternoon, and the adults at nights.

07:07- Flora Belkis Lescaille: When we didn't have a calculator to teach math, we added with pebbles, with sticks, with whatever we had on-hand to teach our classes.

07:17- Ana Débora Mola: When we taught classes to adults at night, we didn't have lights. We used a handmade kerosene lamp, we called "La Chismosa", so we were able to teach with that lamp.

In the afternoon, after I finished class with the little kids, between noon and 2 pm, while the other group had classes, I taught the girls to embroider and weave. Even that I did.

07:48- Flora Belkis Lescaille: We had challenges. I will show you some pictures of the countryside, in the Sierra Maestra, this is what I said about the hammocks where we slept. You see? Here is a teacher sleeping in the hammock at the camp.

You've heard about social workers. We did not only teach classes, we also registered children who were born without having a birth certificate. We conducted marriage ceremonies.

At that time, many children were malnourished or died of parasites and the first thing we did was some educational activities, to teach the rural people the importance of wearing shoes. We were taught how to give vaccines and we vaccinated the population; we even helped some women give birth.

08:40- Narrator: *Teams that work in the morning study in the afternoon and the other way around. A 13 subject program to cover in 4 months which takes the majority of the day. Volunteer teachers are formed in mountains since they will teach there and need to get acquainted with those places and get to know rural people. It is a new concept of education, that considers the place where people will have classes as the people's needs. An education program rooted in real life, about life and for life.*

09:27- Among us, there was a person who became a martyr and preceded this entire Literacy Campaign, the symbol of the Literacy Campaign. My friend Ana had the honor of being a camp mate of Conrado Benítez

09:46- Ana Débora Mola: Conrado Benítez. I always say he was a boy, because he was 19 years old. He was very serious, very respectful; he liked to share with everyone else. He was placed in a little school in the Escambray Mountains. That day, I had been invited to have lunch at the house of a countryman who had a little battery-operated radio. At the time of the news report, we all heard about his murder.

10:34- Ana Débora Mola: I remember that I cried out: "Conrado Benítez!" "It can't be true! It can't be true!". "That's our comrade. That's my comrade, my comrade!". I had to sit down to meditate on that horrendous crime, they thought that with that act they could stop the Literacy Campaign from happening.

11:04- Flora Belkis Lescaille: Our graduation ended in tears, because Conrado was our comrade and it was a tragedy that he was murdered, when he only was carrying his teacher notebook.

It was one of the things that committed us even more apart from the fact that we already knew our task was to teach literacy.

Her mother wrote a song dedicated to Conrado Benitez.

11:31- Ana Débora Mola: My mother had a gift for writing poems and she wrote a verse dedicated to the martyr Conrado Benitez. I can sing it or recite it. In which way should I ...?

11:47- voices off camera: *Sing, of course! Sing!:*

11:49- Ana Débora Mola: Sung? Ah well, she dedicated it like this:

singing a cappella: Conrado Benitez martyr teacher of Cuba,
where all Cubans want to remember you,
We have formed a brigade, to go teach literacy,
bearing your healthy name to honor you in this way.

In this year a moral commitment has been fulfilled,
there is no one left illiterate in our triumphant Cuba

The brigadistas have won the great final battle.
Goodbye illiteracy, scourge of all peoples,
Cuba has already won.

12:52- The anthem of Literacy Campaign:

Recitation:

Cuba, Cuba!

Study! Work! Rifle!

Pencil! Primer! Handbook!

Alphabetize! Alphabetize!

We will win!

We are the Conrado Benítez Brigade,
we are the vanguard of the Revolution,
with our book held high we reach our goal:
bring literacy to all of Cuba.
Over plains and mountains

the brigadista goes
complying with the Homeland,
fighting for peace.
Down with imperialism!
Up with freedom!
We carry the light of truth.
together with the letters.

13:34- Ana Débora Mola: We were already there; we had already started with the Literacy Campaign, but not in a massive way, as it was done when the brigadistas arrived. They supported literacy work in a stronger way.

13:49- Flora Belkis Lescaille: What was our work there? -apart from placing the young students who came-. We gave them information, because we already had a little bit, just a bit of methodological experience. We had received the courses of the various manuals with which students would have worked. We also made sure that they felt good, so when their families came to see them, they would find them safe, and in well protected places. That was our fundamental duty.

14:25- Ana Débora Mola: We learned from the farmers that they were caring people, very sincere.

12:57- Ana Débora Mola: Although the years have passed, many of them still write to us and tell us: "Teacher, I am now an engineer" or "my children are now teachers, nurses". So, they still remember us. And I remember that when we left, they cried. They cried when they saw us packing our bags as we were about to leave that place.

15:12- Flora Belkis Lescaille: Education is a reciprocal process: You give, but you also receive. I have been teaching for 47 years and every day I receive so much from them. I tell them "I love you". It is true, as Martí said, "Education is a work of infinite love". You give, but you receive as well. It is a constant learning that we receive from that profession that we learned out there.

16:33- Song: "Locuras" by Silvio Rodríguez

CREDITS