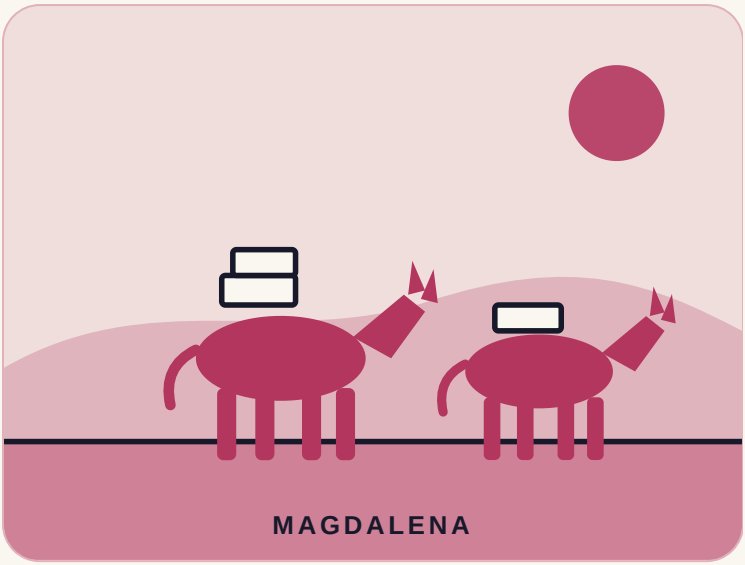

COLOMBIA

The teacher with a library on two donkeys

A Colombian teacher loaded books onto two donkeys and rode for hours to reach children in far villages.

WHERE	La Gloria, Magdalena
WHO	Luis Soriano, a primary school teacher in northern Colombia
WHEN	1990s to 2011

4 min read

CHAPTER ONE

The story

Luis Soriano is a primary school teacher from La Gloria, in northern Colombia. His pupils lived in poor farming villages. Many fell behind in school. Their parents often could not read, and there were no books at home.

Two donkeys

Soriano wanted to bring books to the children. At home, he saw two donkeys with no work. He put the books on their backs. The donkeys were called Alfa and Beto.

Every Wednesday at dusk and every Saturday at dawn, he set off. He rode Alfa. Beto followed with more books and a blanket for the children to sit on. Some trips took up to four hours each way. He visited 15 villages in turn.

In each village, 40 to 50 children waited. They got help with homework. They learned to read. They heard adventure stories and geography lessons. Parents often joined in.

At first, many people thought he was crazy.

> **They'd yell, 'Carnival season is over.' ... Now I've overcome that.**
>
> LUIS SORIANO, TO CNN, 2010

120	15	4,000
books carried on a trip	villages on his rounds	children helped by 2010, CNN says

Books, and bandits

The library began small. One report says it began with about 70 books. It grew after Soriano wrote to a well-known Colombian writer, Juan Gossaín. He asked for a copy of the writer's novel. Gossaín told the story on his radio show. Books poured in from listeners. Soon there were about 4,800.

The work was not safe. In 2006, bandits stopped him at a river crossing. They tied him to a tree when they found he had no money. In 2008, he broke his leg falling from a donkey. He kept going.

Soriano and his wife also built a free library next to their home. In 2010, CNN said it held 4,200 books, mostly donated. It was the biggest free library in Magdalena.

In 2011, a film about him aired on US public television. Soriano says books connect children to the wider world. "Literature is how we connect them with the world."

How it unfolded

- **90s** Soriano begins taking books to villages by donkey.
- **2006** Bandits tie him to a tree on a river road.
- **2008** He breaks his leg falling from a donkey.
- **2010** CNN says over 4,000 children have been helped.
- **2011** A film about him airs on US public television.

CHAPTER TWO

What makes it special

Many reading projects wait for readers to come. This one went to them, through valleys, on two donkeys.

It began when a teacher looked at what he already had: two donkeys with no work.

OUR TAKE

He did not wait for children to reach the books. He took the books to the children.

CHAPTER THREE

What we can learn

1

Look at what you already have

Soriano saw two donkeys with no work, and they became his book carriers.

Try this: List three things you own or can do that sit unused. Pick one to try.

2 Go to the people

He rode up to four hours each way, instead of waiting for children to come.

Try this: Take one useful thing to someone who cannot come to you.

3 Let the laughing pass

At first, many people thought he was crazy. He kept coming.

Try this: Do the next small step on your idea, even if someone laughs.

4 Ask for help

His letter to a writer led listeners to send thousands of books.

Try this: Write one short message asking for one clear thing you need.

ONE THOUGHT TO TAKE AWAY

A book travels furthest when someone carries it.

Sources

CNN
Teaching kids to read from the back of a burro (2010)

PBS POV
Biblioburro (film page, 2011)

Tropical Commons
Biblioburro: the donkey-powered mobile library educating and empowering children and communities in rural Colombia (2019)

Fact-check note: The sources agree on the main story and differ on details. The start year is 1990 (CNN) or 1997 (Tropical Commons); Wikipedia, citing The New York Times, says the late 1990s, and PBS says “a decade ago” in 2011. So the story gives only “1990s” in the timeline. He carried 120 books on a trip (CNN) and the library began with about 70 (Tropical Commons). The collection is given as 4,200 books in 2010 (CNN) and about 4,800 (Tropical Commons and Wikipedia, citing The New York Times, 2008). CNN gives his age as 38 and PBS as 39. The story of the letter to Juan Gossaín is from Tropical Commons and Wikipedia; I did not open The New York Times or The Washington Post articles that Wikipedia cites. Wikipedia reports that he had a leg amputated in 2012 after a donkey accident; that is one source, so the story leaves it out. CNN and Tropical Commons place him in the Magdalena region; the pin shows the region, not an exact village. Lines marked "Our take" are interpretation. Everything else comes from the sources above.