



come all ye farmgirls

when you have a passel of passionate farmgirls behind you, magic happens

by Aimee Steiner



MaryJanesFarm has a wonderful way of reaching farmgirls wherever they live—rural, urban, suburban ... and even around the globe. In our Aug/Sept 2010 issue, we published a “readers write” article from Aimee Steiner, a farmgirl living on a tropical isle over 6,000 miles from our farm. The tiny island of Rota, inhabited by only 3,000 people (and one true-blue farmgirl) is just 3 miles wide and 11 miles long and sits in the middle of the Northern Pacific Ocean atop the Mariana Trench, the deepest part of the world’s oceans—1½ miles deeper than the highest mountain in the world. Aimee, who teaches English and lives on the island with her family, asked our readers for used books to restock the island library destroyed by a super typhoon in 2010. Following is her account of the magic that happened when our farmgirls rallied to the cause.

Remotely located in the middle of the Pacific Ocean, surrounded by sharks and whales, Rota is a world apart from modern life, still richly saturated by the island Chamorro culture that has thrived here for 10,000 years. Men still bow to women whenever they meet, and dinner is usually an event for a minimum of 20 people. Meals are prepared outdoors, by hand. Many people live on whatever delicious foods they can hunt in the jungle and fish out of the sea. You would never dream of locking your car or worrying about your children running free here; it’s a close-knit world steeped in love.

Our geographic isolation is both a joy and a struggle, as some elements of life are glaringly absent—one of those elements being books. While most people take books for granted, there are almost none on Rota. Sturdy books that survive the trip to our island are passed hand to hand until their covers are nearly destroyed from overuse. In August 2010, I wrote an appeal to *MaryJanesFarm* readers to donate books that would help build a new library on the island. I had no idea that the response would be so extreme.

In the beginning, a small number of boxes trickled in. But soon enough, the stunned postmistress would simply wave her hand toward the back of the post office whenever we rumbled up on the sandy road in our beaten-up, red pickup truck.

Boxes and boxes of books flooded in from every part of the U.S., along with donations of art supplies, clothing, and other materials. (One reader, whose child is autistic, even had her daughter hand-make us hundreds of beautiful bookmarks!) Locals would stare at us wide-eyed and speechless as we loaded 30 or 40 boxes of books into the back of our pickup truck nearly every day for months on end; the customs officials at the tiny airport were overwhelmed. We bought a tarp to accommodate the heavy rains of typhoon season; no books were hurt. Aside from teaching, I had a second full-time job just answering the e-mails that

came in from throughout the U.S.

Many *MaryJanesFarm* readers wanted to help us. I kept picturing the scene on the other end in my mind. A farmgirl would read our article; go out and buy or find dozens, and in many cases, hundreds of books; figure out a way to pack them up; and lug them to the post office, filling out the requisite paperwork and paying to ship the books all the way here. I could not believe what was happening. It was incredible that so many people went to such tiring, expensive lengths to help us.



stack of books (top) ©iStockphoto.com/APCortizas Jr

We lived in a tiny cement hut and quickly ran out of spare room. We finally gave up and stacked the books in our main living area until we could no longer walk inside of our house. We built a shed outside to make room for the enormous number of donations, but the books outgrew the shed in a hurry. Desperate, I began to pray for more storage space. Someone magically offered an old shipping container for the books. We filled the entire container. Ultimately, the donations from *MaryJanesFarm* readers amounted to over 10,000 volumes for an island of 3,000 people—or more than three books for every resident. (And the books are still coming!)

Islanders quickly gravitated towards the books, eager for a taste of what they witnessed being hauled from the post office to our hut. Shyly, the women asked me about romance novels. Children wanted to know what books they might be permitted to use and when. People inquired excitedly about their favorite writers and titles.

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What seemed like a simple enough idea grew puzzling. How was I planning to distribute the books? I had no idea! I certainly had no room in my hut for MaryJane's library. As I tried to make sense out of what happened, it was the readers of *MaryJanesFarm* who not only donated the books, but helped me solve the problem of how to make them available. In particular, a humble Dakota horologist named

Linda Davis and an energetic Florida couple, Patricia and Richard Dunn, became absolutely essential to me as I navigated the tsunami of books. I relied upon these wise, devout readers of *MaryJanesFarm* to assist me in planning the next phase of our fantasy bookstore. They offered tireless support of every sort as I slowly untangled the aftermath of our gigantic success. (continued)



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Via literally hundreds of e-mails, my trusted MaryJane allies—especially Richard, Patty, and Linda—and I decided to offer to reopen the typhoon-ruined Rota public library. (The last super typhoon heavily damaged the village library, soaking and wrecking all its books.)

One sunny afternoon, Rota's First Lady, Estrella Clitar Mendiola (the mayor's wife), paid me a visit. Butterflies hovered over the fragrant, flowering bushes in my front lawn as I greeted her with a kiss. Having come a long way from humble beginnings herself, she took a quick glance at the 10,000 donated books in the shipping container and began to cry. It was a dream come true for her—she could establish a reading program for island children with the many volunteers who were willing to offer their services. At the emotional ceremony, using English as her second language, she thanked the readers of *MaryJanesFarm*.

Estrella sent mayoral employees over to fetch the books. The men were astonished. Laboring in the hot sun, they kept coming back with a rickety trailer and piling it high with books only to note that there were thousands more. They were as surprised as I was. I watched ebulliently as the men perched precariously on mounds of books, carefully carrying them to their new home, the tropical sun shimmering and dancing on the book covers, seabirds circling the bright air overhead.

Today, thanks to your readers, Rota has a brand-new library brimming with beautiful books that are devoured by local children. Other donations were also speedily consumed; nothing was wasted.



Aimee's son, "the only blond-haired, blue-eyed toddler on the island," helps sort books (right) and enjoys the new library with a friend (above).



In the end, the article and its result is a powerful testimony about the farmgirl's heart. The generosity of *MaryJanesFarm* readers is astonishing. Every single box shipped was a costly labor of love—I floated through the year on clouds of joy as the stunned recipient on the other end. On Rota, we run out of rice when the ship can't get through the weather. We run out of gas when the tanker is delayed. We run out of power when the fragile generator changes its mind about working. But we never run out of books. You can now catch sight of a little child meandering

through a sprawling mass of clucking chickens, book clutched tightly in hand, as if carrying a precious baby.

Your gifts created not just a moment of pleasure, but rather a legacy that will be utilized for generations.

On behalf of the island of Rota, I thank you for what amounts to a farmgirl-fueled miracle of staggering proportions.

library donation ceremony

