



PRONiCA

News from Nicaragua

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Gesundheit!

Dr. John Glick

The Gesundheit! Institute, founded by Patch Adams, brought fifteen volunteer clowns from the US, Peru, and Canada to Nicaragua in March. Our host was ProNica, an international organization which promotes grassroots human services projects and operates Quaker House, where we lived in wonderful community.

The western hemisphere's 2nd poorest country (80% of people live on less than \$2 a day), Nicaragua has suffered wars, earthquakes, hurricanes, and economic blockades. These severely damaged the infrastructure and economy of what was once the breadbasket of Central America. The entire nation is said to be suffering from post-traumatic stress disorder. What was once a peaceful and outgoing culture is now rife with crime, prostitution, homelessness, malnutrition, domestic abuse, and alcoholism on an unprecedented scale.

We met many wonderful social activists who are doing great work in a variety of different projects. We met thousands of Nicaraguan men, women and

children who reached out to us in joy, kindness and friendliness. We were moved by their spirit of courage and resilience.

Our first visit was on International Women's Day to La Esperanza (The Hope) Prison for Women. We visited Acahualinca preschools for children of

workers in the nearby dump, where we created a spontaneous clown variety show. We ventured over a nearby bridge guarded by street toughs, into the La Chureca community itself, a potentially tense situation diffused by laughter, play, and music. A local trio of street performers, with drums and a life-size puppet joined us.



Clowns with Nemagon victims

We clowned in a facility for abandoned, special-needs children and a school

for abandoned and abused children at Jinotepe. We clowned in hospitals for women with cancer, for children with burns and orthopedic injuries. One hospital in Corinto had very little equipment and resources. First on their needs list, a pediatric blood pressure cuff. Their dentist had no tools, no chair.

We clowned in the field in front of the national capitol building, now a squatters' camp of 700 banana pickers and their families. For three years they have camped there seeking assistance for treating illnesses due to Nemagon exposure. US-based multi-nationals sold this

Seven months of meals in La Chureca are guaranteed by generous supporters who responded to the March newsletter appeal. More inside...

see *Alternative* pg 3

News from Nicaragua

published by the ProNica Committee since 1987

June 2009 Vol 22 No 2

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ProNica's mission is to assist in creating and sustaining programs by and for the Nicaraguan people. These projects should hold promise for grassroots growth, arise from Nicaraguan needs and tradition, and provide not only survival but also empowerment.

ProNica's priorities are on community cohesiveness and economic development, non-violence training, health, education, agriculture and women's empowerment. We seek to link Nicaraguan people with concerned individuals internationally to promote understanding and mutual action. Educating those who seek information or to be of service is part of our mission.

Our work is accomplished by an international core of dedicated volunteers and staff who seek to embody Quaker principles of consensual decision making and action and respect for that of God in everyone. This service project arose from a deep concern over the international exploitation of the Nicaraguan people and resources and a wish to respond in practical and constructive ways.

ProNica, Incorporated is a 501(c)(3) tax exempt corporation under the spiritual care of the Southeastern Yearly Meeting, Religious Society of Friends (Quakers) with offices in St. Petersburg, Florida and Managua, Nicaragua. ProNica is a registered Non-Governmental Organization (NGO) in Nicaragua.

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Introducing...

Kathy Hersh
ProNica Board Member

I am excited to be the Southeastern Yearly Meeting's representative on the ProNica Board of Directors for the next three years. I have been an admirer and supporter of ProNica for a long time.

This year, I was asked to serve on the Board and became convinced I was needed. I have a combination of knowledge and experience that can help facilitate ProNica's mission as we respond in creative ways to the global economic crisis. I am familiar with the 20th century history of Nicaragua. While covering the 1979 revolution as a correspondent for ABC News, I fell in love with the Nicaraguan people.

During my tenure in Latin America, I met many wonderful people everywhere I traveled. But nowhere did I feel more warmly treated than in Nicaragua. In spite of having seen the terrible effects of the civil war on the country, most of my memories are of the good times I had getting acquainted with the beautiful countryside and the sincere hospitality, courage, and generosity of the people.

My husband and I will chaperone a Quaker teen delegation to Nicaragua in June. Our son David, 16, is part of the group. This will be the first high school group to go. I am looking forward to teaming up with Lillian and Trevor to help facilitate a life-changing experience for these young Quakers. I believe that through visits like this one, young people become inspired to view the world from different perspectives. Perhaps they'll help sustain ProNica's mission to empower Nicaraguans to empower themselves and their communities.

With the success of youth delegations, ProNica becomes an agent for change in how North Americans view the under-developed world and their responsibilities as global citizens.

I look forward to the next stage in ProNica's development and am ready to put to work my experience, ideas, optimism, and deep regard for the Nicaraguan people. □

*Your tax-deductible donation
supports Nicaragua projects.
Learn more at www.ProNica.org.*

Alternative from pg 1 banned-in-the-U.S. pesticide to Nicaraguan farmers resulting in serious neurologic and immune system problems including kidney failure, birth defects, cancers, and death. Legal judgments against these multi-nationals are tied up in appeal and the Nicaraguan government has not responded to the concerns of these people with whom we danced and hugged and played and even formed a small parade.

Every place we clowned we were met with open hearts and open arms. We were astonished by the kindness and warmth of these people despite their history of suffering and oppression. People approached us and hugged us and prayed for us. It was a profound experience of the power of love in the midst of desperate circumstances. No doubt this was in part due to the great regard given to service clowns, by the Nicaraguan people.

While building a hydroelectric plant in rural Nicaragua, Ben Linder, a US volunteer engineer and service clown, was murdered in 1987 by US-backed contras in a war against the Sandinista government. His murder stirred huge controversies in the world press, and resulted in Congressional hearings questioning the morality of the contra war. His martyrdom was a significant event here in Nicaragua, and his funeral procession stretched for 7 blocks. The Ben Linder House in Managua serves as a meeting place for Nicaraguan and international activists to meet and develop policies and programs for positive social change. We were honored to be invited to speak at the weekly meeting at Ben Linder House where we shared *Gesundheit!* Institute's story and dream for world peace and justice through health care and loving service.

The most desperate circumstance we witnessed was at the Oriental Market, a large outdoor labyrinth of houses, booths, kiosks, streets, footpaths, and open sewers. This is a place frequented by thieves, prostitutes, and street children, many of them glue sniffers and themselves thieves and prostitutes. We were accompanied and well protected by young men from the organization Los Quinchos. This organization reaches out to glue-addicted children, providing shelter, food, showers, safety, warmth, and care and a path towards a bright future (we visited one of their group homes in the countryside providing education, recreation and a violence-free community until the children are old enough to attend trade school or college).

At the Oriental Market the clowns, the Los Quinchos

people and our ProNica hosts were joined by ten or more street children 'huffing' glue from baby food jars or soda pop bottles. Disheveled, dirty, dazed, they led us into their world. As we played music and danced, blew bubbles, tossed balloons, our little parade threaded its way through



Clown John with Superstar

the narrow streets and paths. The children inhaled the toxic glue fumes constantly and though dazed and high, were delighted by our parade of color and music. We kept very close together and at one point formed a circle in a little clearing on the *Callejon de la Muerte* (Alley of Death). There we danced, taking turns in the center of the circle. We danced in an ecstatic transcendence of the despair, so heavy in this place of pain and exploitation. It is no wonder these lonely children need glue to float over such a painful life in the street. With music pulsing the entire way, we emerged from the labyrinth onto the Managua city street.

We got in cars and returned to peaceful Quaker House. The children returned to the market, to the streets, to the glue. We felt overwhelmed, heartbroken, and moved. We talked at great length about our experience there. We had more questions than answers. What is our responsibility to these children? What is our responsibility to this country that suffered so much from a proxy war inflicted from afar? What about children in our own country who suffer from depression, despair, suicide, domestic abuse, community violence? How do we respond? What is the right action?

We know that we must begin in the context of our own lives to show loving kindness at every opportunity. We must become more knowledgeable and responsible citizens and insist that our nation, our corporations, our communities act responsibly and mindfully of the health and economic consequences of any public or private action.

Nicaragua gave us a great gift. Our eyes are opened to human suffering. When the banana we eat is linked with the birth deformity of a child we held in our arms we must assume some responsibility. When someone suffers from my unconsciousness, I must assume some responsibility. This is a difficult gift, but a necessary one if we are to co-create a desirable world.

We all want to return to Nicaragua. We want to be more involved in the solution. *Gesundheit!* is forever grateful for the good people of ProNica. This was a life-changing experience.

Thank you. □

Jump to See the Possibility

Sydney Frey

It isn't normal to see a line of clowns weaving through Mercado Oriental, Managua's biggest sprawling maze of vendors. As they move through the market, a tall clown blows bubbles, "*¡burbujas!*" Another wears a plush parrot puppet who flirts shamelessly with small children. All are decked out in full clown regalia – bright, shiny, feathery, squeaky.

They keep moving until they arrive at a small, packed-earth clearing in the market where suddenly they are surrounded by kids, some of whom simply throw their arms around the clowns. One clown breaks out his accordion. Another plays a funny-looking piano-kazoo.

Almost immediately, a circle forms, kids and clowns holding hands, dancing and hooting. Kids take turns dancing in the middle of the circle, each rewarded in turn with wild applause. The older boys break-dance, ignoring the dissonance between their moves and the polka-like circus music. The circle's energy bursts into twos and threes, kids and clowns still dancing, hollering and giggling.

The kids, of varying ages, are some of Managua's *huelepegos*, glue-sniffing-street-kids. Nearly all of them hold a jar or bottle of thick honey-colored glue. Some of them rig it inside their shirts so that it hangs below their chins, a constant high. The high disturbs the normal operations of their frontal lobes, causing them reduced capacity for impulse control, and reduced sensitivity to hunger and other sufferings. Some have hair that's stained malnutrition-yellow; most wear dirty, ill-fitting clothing.

And... nobody hesitates. The clowns and the kids play; they dance and twirl and chase bubbles. It is automatic, as if by some prearranged agreement: no hand-wringing, no sadness, no handouts. What we all need is some FUN.

Then they're on the move again, kids and clowns together, stringing out of the market to a nearby park, a better place to play. The clown with the parrot, a blue-wigged woman

named Chrissy, is preceded by a boy named Norman. As they move, Norman rushes ahead to look for babies and toddlers in the crowded market. "Here's one! Here's one!" he yells, and he himself coos and wiggles at them until

Chrissy arrives and the parrot takes over baby outreach. Mothers seem unsure what to make of the clown-street kid alliance, but they encourage their babies to flirt back at the parrot.



Clown Kristen with hospitalized woman

The clowns come from the Gesundheit! Institute, an organization of healer-clowns in the tradition of Patch Adams. The accordion playing clown – Johnny Glick, a family practitioner and the group's organizer – removes his big red nose to talk. He explains that traditional Western healers tend to focus on the problem, treating the wound or the trauma. Clowns, he says, interact with the whole person, to encourage what is already healthy and good. "The kid remembers he's a kid," Johnny says. "We jump over the problem to see the possibility."

The clowns spent a week in Nicaragua in March, visiting imprisoned women, kids at the dump, the hospitalized, glue-sniffing street kids – the most vulnerable. They met some of the Nicaraguan clowns who clowned with Ben Linder, the young clown-engineer from Portland, Oregon killed by the Contras in 1987. The secretary-general of the Nicaraguan Clown Union tells them, "Art doesn't have borders."

The clowns from the Gesundheit! Institute have an analysis to accompany their fun. Johnny holds the floor for a moment at the women's prison, where women are serving long sentences for nonviolent crimes of poverty, like petty drug offenses. It is March 8th, International Women's Day. Johnny apologizes to the women for the misdeeds of men, for the unjust global economic system which has a hand in their imprisonment. Then someone turns up the stereo, and a goofy dance party breaks out.

"What a clown communicates is this is not a normal moment." Johnny wears baggy white pants with little red hearts printed all over them. "What is possible when we forget what is normal?" □

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Feeding Managua's Children

Katrina Simmons and Terry Asma

photos by Terry Asma, www.2020studios.com

Grinding gears are drowned by the deafening din of gulls and vultures at La Chureca. Maria Hernandez crawls from her make-shift tent in Managua's garbage dump, eyes burning, and lungs seared by the smoldering refuse that surrounds her. Today, if all goes well, she will eat.

Hernandez grew up in Nicaragua's capital, helping her mother support her family by salvaging plastic, cardboard and scrap metal. In the largest of Central America's countries, where nearly half the population lives below the poverty line, according to UNICEF's website, many of Managua's children spend their days the same way. School, for most of them, is out of the question. Even if they could afford uniforms, books and pencils, their families need help from dawn to dusk, just to put food in their bellies.

While La Chureca offers at least some hope of survival through salvaging, many other young people living on the streets have no income. Girls often turn to prostitution, perpetuating the poverty cycle: One in four babies in Nicaragua are born to adolescent mothers who have a hard time supporting their children.

Across town, in the pre-dawn hours at El Mercado, the largest market in Central America, the air is thick with the smell of glue. Emaciated, glassy-eyed teens rouse themselves from stupor, inhaling glue from baby-food jars and Pepsi bottles. It is not doing drugs, they say; it's only to forget the hunger pangs for a while. When the vendors begin to arrive for the day, the market's night dwellers shift to El Filtro, a transition house run by Los Quinchos.



Los Quinchos, a not-for-profit group funded in part by the International Quaker organization ProNica, also runs a farm, a cultural centre, and workshops in hammock-making and other vocations. El Filtro is their intake house where street kids find a meal, do laundry, have a bath and find a safe place to sleep – to experience what

life off the street could be like. The only requirement is that glue must be left outside. Once they are off the street, some of these adolescents pass on the favour, by helping the children at La Chureca.

On the edge of the city's dump, a pipe brings water pirated from a nearby neighbourhood. A young mother bathes her infant to relieve stinging throats, burning eyes, and the accumulation of grim. Six mornings a week Los Quinchos feeds some of the poorest children in the city. They offer not only rice and beans, but a chance to wash. By providing reading and math lessons they also offer the hope that one day the children of Managua can escape the cycle of poverty and hunger.

Statistics from UNICEF website (Feb.19, 2009): At A Glance: Nicaragua (<http://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/nicaragua.html>) □

Former volunteers and college delegation leaders informed ProNica of their plans for fundraising events to support the feeding program. Some innovative ideas include benefits concerts, contest, raffles, personal appeals. Share your idea. Plan an event. Support La Chureca through ProNica. □

Imagining the Impossible

Lillian Hall, ProNica program coordinator

The children who eat every day at the dump are happily oblivious to the unfolding crisis due to lack of funds. No one at the Los Quinchos Association, nor me, dared to cause any uncertainty or stress in these youngsters who have enough challenges in their young lives. Within ProNica and within Los Quinchos, we simply held strong to the belief that people would be moved to help and the lunches would continue. A way simply had to open. And it has – for the next seven months anyway.



In their new school uniforms, Chureca kids enjoy lunch

Onsite I noticed that the portions are somewhat smaller with less meat. With uncertain funding, the Quinchos stretch resources as far as possible.

Still, the amount of rice, beans, vegetables, and meat given to each child is a hearty meal for such small bodies. The children come straggling in dressed either in amazingly clean school uniforms (thanks to the Nipigon Rotary Club of Canada) or in the dirty rags of some older boys, who sadly are addicted to glue and do not attend school. Sometimes even young mothers, holding babies in their arms, come for food to feed their infants. It is a motley crew with the common need of a decent meal. It is that

meal which brings them together each day as a little community within the greater, more hostile and desperate, community of La Chureca.

Thanks to the many people who were moved into action by last issue's articles on the La Chureca lunch program losing its major donor, ProNica received enough money to keep the program going another seven months. People took to heart the message that no donation is too small and we received donations from \$1 to \$2,000 dollars. We send our heartfelt thanks to all those who contributed, and to those who wanted to, but whose purse strings did not permit it. Every cent really does count.

Los Quinchos director Zelinda Roccia had the vision to create this small oasis within the dump. Some thought that was a crazy venture – to create beauty within the hell that is La Chureca. A place where children could play, and run, and swim and eat, and lift up their arms to be hugged by staff and foreign visitors. A place to simply be children and do the things all children want to do.

Dr. John Glick of the Gesundheit! Institute's humanitarian clowning missions said, "We begin to imagine what is possible when we stop worrying about what is normal." The Quinchos program at the Managua city dump is indeed the embodiment of that philosophy. Thanks to all who imagined a different reality for La Chureca. □

As of newsletter deadline, 54 donations totaling over \$10,000 have been received for the feeding program. The five largest donations were for over \$1,000 each; the rest came in increments of \$1 to \$500. ...**THUS...** For the next seven months, forty nutritious meals a day are guaranteed by your generous donations. To ensure meals are served without interruption, ProNica accepts your tax-deductible donation. 100% goes to the La Chureca feeding program; write "Chureca" in the memo line. □

Quaker Youth Delegation

ProNica hosts college-student delegations and adult groups for 3 weeks to 7 days. In June, 11 Florida teenagers will learn first-hand about Nicaraguan teenagers, their culture, challenges, goals. They will visit ProNica project partners who serve youth and perform a community service project.

A blog will keep parents and friends back home up-to-date with their experiences as they happen. Close-Up Productions will document the delegation; DVDs will be available in July. Check our website for more. And, read all about it in the September newsletter. □

Even in the Midst of Crisis, We Give Thanks

Kitty Madden, Casa Materna volunteer and liaison

The Chinese character for CRISIS is made of the characters for Danger and Opportunity.

During her Thanksgiving 2008 visit, Jo-Ann Snyder of the Friends of the Casa Materna (FCM) board asked the Casa mothers, "what do you want me to tell people when I return to the States?" Immediately, they replied, "Tell them that we feel safe." Safe, they said, that they would be nourished in so many ways while awaiting the births, safe in this community of other pregnant mothers taking care of one another, safe with the Casa staff that cares for them so lovingly and safe knowing they have the opportunity to give birth to healthy babies.

Yet, now in 2009, as we approach Mother's Day (May 30th in Nicaragua) this basic sense of "safety" is threatened. The world financial crisis affects the income of faithful Casa friends in Spain. Contributions from Spain in past years had covered more than two-thirds of the Casa budget. But in 2008 it only covered a fifth, or \$35,000. This money helped supply food and other basic needs for 775 mothers throughout the year. In 2009, it is possible that nothing will be available.

A generous grant of \$7,000 in memory of Mychal Rushwald, whose brother Ben was a ProNica volunteer in Achuapa in 2005 has helped us through the initial months

ProNica cheerfully sent over \$6000 to Casa Materna from funds raised by the Rushwald Family Foundation.

Nicaragua Travel

Over the years, ProNica has hosted groups large and small. Each itinerary is planned according to each group's interests. Artists visited museums, galleries and artist studios. College delegations have worked along side Nicaraguan hosts in a service project, such as planting trees and bushes around a new library, rebuilding a rutted road, or painting a school. Some groups begin their visit with a week of one-on-one Spanish school, a good way to jump-start their communication skills.

Travelers to Nicaragua usually find something that touches their hearts; they are changed forever. Come see for yourself. Inquire at the stateside office. □

of this year. Still, the Casa staff has spent some sleepless nights wondering how they will cover basic needs in the months ahead. The funding cuts are coupled with increases in food prices that have sometimes tripled in the past year.

Sometimes it helps to look back...



Casa mothers cook together

In late March, Jeronima Ubeda and Miryam Garcia sat with me and with Susan Lambert of the FCM board to reminisce about the early days of the Casa as together we assessed present needs and future directions. "In the beginning," they recalled, "there was literally no money, no furniture, no food at all." Of course, there were also no mothers until late October of 1991.

"As we face the present crisis," Jeronima said, "it's good to remember what it was like in the beginning and how we were able to survive through hard work and the help of good friends. These are the friends who have helped us welcome and provide safe birthing for over 13,400 mothers over 18 years."

Thus, remembering that past crises have brought opportunity in the midst of danger, the Casa staff wants their friends at ProNica to know that while we are deeply concerned about how we will make up the deficit, we are also abundantly grateful for the many ways we continue to be blessed by your ongoing solidarity with the mothers and newborns of the Casa Materna. □

Friends Witness Tours

Every August is the annual international music and solidarity festival in Achuapa. Friends Witness Summer 2009 Tour will enjoy this popular event AND meet ProNica Project Partners. Friends Witness Tourists will travel throughout Nicaragua for 11 days.

Airfare is lowest in recent years making travel more available to more folks. \$100 reserves your place. Contact the stateside office for more details. □

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www.ProNica.org

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Cuáquera*



Panchita Fletes
in Managua, Nicaragua

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- Monthly gifts provide sustaining support for ProNica's Project Partners
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*Your generous
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program in La
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*On behalf of
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thanks you.*