



PRONiCA

News from Nicaragua

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Quakers Empowering Nicaraguans

Introducing the Martin Centeño Cooperative in Rio Blanco

Lillian Hall, ProNica Program Coordinator

ProNica is pleased to introduce a new project partner. The Martin Centeño Cooperative in Rio Blanco is named after a young community member killed in the 1980's Contra War. The families who make up the community lived on the far side of the Musun mountain in the center of Nicaragua in a small community named El Cedro. Such was the intensity of the war in the area, the families fled in the dark in 1984, leaving behind their homes, their animals, and all their belongings. They traveled on foot at night to avoid detection and certain death.



Even the latrines are the original ones and are now in dire need of replacement.



When national and municipal governments all but abandoned them, the community learned to seek support from solidarity organizations. Today 225 inhabitants live in this beautiful little community in simple brick houses built around a basketball court which serves as the center of the community. Over the years, they built a potable water system, a primary school, a pre-school, a church, a communal house for group activities, and a communal kitchen. All this by poor farmers who

live on roughly two or three dollars per day.

In 1985, on the edge of the town of Rio Blanco these war refugees formed an agricultural coop as part of the Sandinista agrarian reform. Having fled El Cedro together, suffered as displaced people in Rio Blanco together, and then forming a cooperative together, the families of Martin Centeño learned to work together as an organized unit. Twenty-five years later, the results of that hard work and organization is abundantly evident.

Built in a tight circle to defend against attack, most of the forty houses in the community were built during the war.

While the community has several committees which address water issues, youth activities, religious activities and problems of infrastructure, one person stands out as a mover and shaker.

Adilia Vega was a young mother when she fled El Cedro with her family. She became active in the Catholic Church and took *see Coop on page 3*

Rio Blanco is a mid-size town of 16,500 people in central Nicaragua and belongs to the province of Matagalpa. In the whole municipality there are 32,000 people in many small villages like the Martin Centeño Coop. It is in the easternmost part of Matagalpa on the road to Mulukuku and the northern Atlantic Coast. About ten years ago they paved the road from Managua - a huge benefit to the people. It is four hours by bus from Managua.

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ProNica's Mission is building sustainable cross-cultural relationships between the people of Nicaragua and North America using Quaker values.

ProNica's Vision is solidarity that empowers and educates Nicaraguans and North Americans.

ProNica assists in creating and sustaining programs by and for the Nicaraguan people. These projects 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, sustainable agriculture and women's empowerment. We seek to link Nicaraguan people with concerned individuals internationally to promote understanding and mutual action. We educate those who seek information or wish to serve.

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.

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Educational Support

Lillian Hall

In February, ProNica responded to a general plea by the dwindling Rama indigenous group for school supplies for their children. The Ramas are the smallest of the Nicaraguan indigenous groups that retain their culture and language. They are located in a remote corner of Nicaragua's southeastern region.

This small Rama community on the Rio Indio is made up of 58 families, most of whom live on the edge of the river or in the small town of Greytown. While the Rama people make their living by fishing and subsistence agriculture, and live very simply, they value the education of their children and want them to study in order to help provide for their families and contribute to the development of their communities. While they currently study in the Spanish language at their local school, they hope to one day be able to study in their native language as a way of ensuring its survival and to strengthen their indigenous identity.

The Ramas have come a long way in terms of education. When they first went to Greytown and the Rio Indio from Rama Key, there was no public school. The children were taught by a Rama woman named Alicia Macrea who is now the President of the Board of the Rama indigenous community.

Doña Alicia expressed 'for our community, the education of our children is very important but we especially want to conserve our customs and cultural roots so that our people will continue to be part of this great multi-ethnic and multi-cultural country.'

In the Rama community there are 7 students in high school, 38 in primary school and 6 in pre-school who risk not studying due to the lack of things as basic as notebooks and pencils. Thanks to a quick response by ProNica, the students received their supplies in time for the beginning of the school year. □

Gift of Life

*Send one to your graduate or father
A hand-calligraphied certificate
acknowledging your financial
donation to ProNica
in celebration or memory of a person or event*

Coop from page 1 on more and more leadership roles. Doña Adilia has since started the Casa de la Mujer in Rio Blanco which addresses problems of domestic violence, rape and incest - work for which she has received praise from some and death threats from others. Doña Adilia can be heard on the radio, at the courthouse, in government offices, and in meetings in her own community.

On Sundays, you will find her officiating Mass in their beautiful church and distributing wine and wafers to the faithful. She is not



Carmen and Doña Adalia

about to wait for a priest to show up. As in every other aspect of life in her community, she sees what needs to be done and does it. Fortunately for the future of the community, there are young people following in her footsteps.

It is ProNica's great pleasure to be working with Doña Adilia and the people of the Martin Centeño Cooperative. Recently ProNica provided \$3,000 for the construction of new latrines for 20 families and took a student delegation from Trinity University to stay in the community. Future delegations may well work on service projects there. Among future needs are repairing the footbridge leading into town, fixing the road, repairing the communal kitchen and community house. □

All in a Day's Work Rosemary Emmett

Several children dipped a plastic bowl into the rusty tank of dirty water at the side of the La Chureca feeding station, slipped off their dirty thongs, poured the water over their feet, and then excitedly tiptoed across to the office to place their wet feet on measuring paper. These last-minute preparations for their feet to be measured for school shoes were a joy to watch. Bismark Chavarría, the project coordinator for the La Chureca project, had prepared for this event by making lists of sizes for the children's blouses, shirts, shoes and socks, as well as skirt and trouser lengths. Backpacks were also "must buys."

When my children were growing up, several weeks of summers were devoted to the Back to School Shopping. Like most working moms, I found this business of buying clothing and classroom supplies a strain on my time, energy and budget - and I was shopping for only two children!

So in January, when visiting ProNica projects under the enlightened guidance of Lillian Hall, I was more than impressed to see how a team of four experts on the subject of shopping for large numbers of children, can transform such a project into a calm, organized and good-humoured expedition!

I accompanied Lillian; Bismark; Zelinda Rocchia, the founder and driving force behind Los Quinchos (which includes the La Chureca project); and Carlos Vidal, Zelinda's administrative and financial assistant; to a large discount store in nearby San Marcos. We planned to

purchase the remaining 25 uniforms (of a total of 45) for children at the La Chureca Project in time for their return to school on February 2nd.

In the store, two young store assistants, ready to give information to our group, soon realized they were in the company of children's wear specialists. Our ProNica team - male and female - tried and tested all clothing on offer. Yes, these skirts hung well, but just look at the cloth itself - it wouldn't stand up to a year of wear and tear at La Chureca. Let's look at some that are a little more expensive, but of a more durable fabric. The trousers were acceptable, but 25 pairs were required and there weren't enough size 8s. How long would it take the store to get them from the wholesalers?



Chureca school girl & mom

The blouses and shirts were checked for the quality of the cotton, declared acceptable, and were bought en masse. Socks, too. And then, it was time to buy shoes - lace-ups for the boys, button bars for the girls. A return visit was required as there weren't enough in stock.

The variety of backpacks offered many designs and sizes for the children - from large, plain, black *see All page 4*

All from page 3 through khaki camouflage designs and smaller sizes bearing cartoon characters. For the girls there were the inevitable Barbie and Cinderella designs. All 25 packs were flattened and placed in one of the several large boxes which the team would take back to Managua.

Next, Lillian and I went to a children's stationery store, where we enjoyed choosing writing books, pencils and other classroom necessities. We bought several finger paints in bright colours. Lillian knew everyone would enjoy these during their pre- or post-lunch craft period at the feeding centre. The skills of some of the older children are often at the same level as that of the younger ones. Script books (alphabet letters to be copied) and tracing paper, both useful for developing early writing skills, were also added to our basket.

Who will supervise and teach the children using these resources we bought? Several 'graduates' of the Quinchos programs – young men of 16/17 years, from identical backgrounds as the young ones - work as assistants and receive a small stipend. Certainly, they and the youngsters appeared to enjoy an excellent rapport.

On another day, in the Acahualinca slum neighbourhood outside La Chureca, staff members Maria Elena Bonilla and Norma Villalta generously gave of their time to show us around the Women's Centre. It comprises a clinic, legal office, social and psychological counselling department, the hairdressing training school and nursery school. In the latter (a disused hall, on loan by the Catholic church) a young assistant explained - and then I saw - the reason why the youngsters wore their backpacks throughout the school session. There are no chairs for either the children or the backpacks to rest on. They stand at the old tables to copy their alphabet letters from the front wall of the room.

That day, Lillian learned that two La Chureca students will have to repeat their previous year at public school. Towards the end of term on several days, they didn't have

the necessary bus fare for the journey from the garbage site to their school (a 1-bus, 2-walk journey each direction costs 75 US cents per day). As they had missed these several classes, they cannot graduate. La Chureca personnel were unaware, otherwise they could have arranged to fund the travel. It seems the students just didn't go to school, but didn't think of telling anyone, no doubt working in the dump site with their parents instead....



Chureca crafts before lunch

When we visit beautiful Nicaragua, whether as seasoned or novice travelers, our reactions are similar: we are shocked, saddened and depressed by the poverty, dirt, danger, lack of even basic necessities amongst which many of these wonderful people live. Their kindness and gentleness, their hospitable welcome and humility, their dignity and pride in the beauty of their country, all conceal the

efforts they have to make in order to live the semblance of a normal life.

Before entering the country from afar, most of us have been inspired to visit, help out, live and work together with these friendly, humble people. We've learned from reading articles and attending presentations by ProNica representatives of the difference our presence or money can make to the children's and adults' lives.

What we are not so aware of, however, until we observe it for ourselves, is the dedication of the local Nicaraguan staff who keep these projects moving on, no matter how little money there is, and no matter how difficult their own family situations might be. I felt so privileged to be with, and listen to some of these wonderful people. They included:

The staff of the women's programs who, at the end of their working day in a dangerous slum zone, walk to their own homes just a few blocks away in the same derelict area. The Chureca Program Coordinator who, to arrive at the feeding station every morning, has a 2-hour journey on a rickety public bus, plus a 20-minute walk through the garbage site itself. The financial director who has to calm concerns when it transpires that there is a funds shortfall and not enough for the children's shoes. The group that shops early every morning to buy and transport lunch supplies for the hot, midday meal for 45 youngsters, prepared by one of the mothers who lives in La Chureca. The team of professional

school uniform buyers (see above!) who ensure that the children go out into life looking as smartly attired as any private school student.

I have been moved and uplifted by my visit to the projects in Nicaragua and henceforth, I shall be holding in God's Light the whole ProNica family, whether they be mature

A uniform is visible proof that the child attends school. Pride of school attendance is often out of reach.

Friends administering from the USA or coordinating in Nicaragua, local Managuans counseling frightened women in Acahualinca, those walking to the bus stop through dirty, smoky La Chureca, or 8-13-year-olds at the Los Quinchos farm, who missed out the first time around and are now having fun shouting and pushing each other into the cool waters of a swimming pool. □

Rosemary Emmett attends Bournemouth Quaker Meeting, England

Important Parallels, Important Differences

Meredith McGuire, Trinity University Professor

Our group of 12 students and 2 professors went to Nicaragua for Spring Break, as a "field trip" for a four-credit course, "International Issues in Health and the Environment." The first half of the term we discussed worldwide issues such as insufficient access to clean water, of food security and safety, and of sickness-causing air contamination by toxic chemicals and pollutants like soot.

Early in the semester, however, the devastating earthquake in Haiti provided a sad, teachable moment. We had just learned how socially- and politically-caused "structural violence" was at the root of so much sickness and suffering in Haiti. The aftermath of the earthquake was like a textbook illustration: When a socio-economic and/or political regime has systematically impoverished a country and deprived all but a tiny elite of the means to sustain their families' lives, then the horrible disaster that befalls the country after an earthquake or hurricane is anything but "natural." As we learned more about Nicaragua – second only to Haiti as the poorest country in the hemisphere – we noticed some important parallels, but also some important differences.

Because ProNica organized our program to emphasize grassroots projects for improving health and the environment, we quickly discovered that many of those differences were due to the resourcefulness, resilience, and community-oriented action of so many of those people at the "grassroots" in Nicaragua. Before the trip, I was worried that our students would be overwhelmed and depressed by intensely encountering the human face of poverty, sickness, environmental degradation, war and other violence. Instead, we all came away with a sense of hope and inspiration. And an appreciation for how much these grassroots efforts were

accomplishing, despite - or maybe partly because of - the lack of money, high-tech "solutions," and high-powered experts.

In fact, how much better were the Nicaraguan low-tech and de-centralized small-scale projects compared to how our society handles the same issues affecting health and the environment. We visited three different projects that illustrated remarkable successes with sustainable agriculture using no chemical pesticides or fertilizers, but improving yields with small-scale, focused irrigation, organic composts and mulches.



Making cheese in Rio Blanco

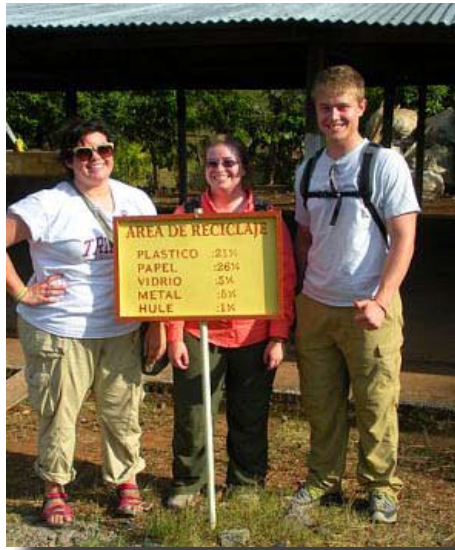
Nicaraguan campesinos may have taken up organic farming out of necessity because the petroleum-based chemicals are imported and expensive. The result is greatly reduced risk of toxic exposure for themselves, their families, and those who consume their produce. At the same time, they are protecting the natural environment from the harmful and often, deadly effects of pesticides and chemical fertilizers.

As expected, the visit to La Chureca, Managua's infamous dump, left an indelible impression on us all. One student said she had trouble "wrapping [her] mind around the thought" that the children who had hugged her so affectionately were later going home to live in shacks of trash, to eat trash, to wear trash, and probably be treated like trash by most people outside the gates. As horrible as the scene in the dump was – acres of veritable mountains of heaped trash, afire and spewing dioxins and other toxins in the acrid

see Parallels page 6

Parallels from page 5 thick, smoky haze, where dozens of phantom-like scavengers poked through the picked-over refuse – it provided a valuable context for us to appreciate the grassroots initiatives for improving residents’ lives. We were especially impressed by the Acahualinca Women’s Center where ordinary women took the initiative to set up programs for improving women’s health and protecting their legal rights.

The most valuable experience – for each of us for different reasons – of the whole trip was our four-day homestay with the families of Cooperativa Martin Centeño on the outskirts of Rio Blanco. Not only did we enjoy staying with the families



Recycle station in Rio Blanco

and learning a little about their lives, but also we admired so much of what they did for their larger community – such as their leadership and support for the work of the Casa de la Mujer: a center that provides counseling and practical help for victims of domestic violence, rape, and abandonment. One student exclaimed about the families of the Cooperativa: “Amazing! I re-learned the human capacity to love and care. They gave me hope in humanity.”

Inspired by their resourcefulness and resilience, the students returned to campus and organized a fund-raiser before Mothers’ Day to benefit the three women’s organizations we had visited in Nicaragua. And the inspiration is likely to be continuing. I have a hunch that the community has helped to shape – or even redirect – 12 careers and 12 students’ hopes for the future. Well, make that 14 – because even though, in our 60s, my husband and I are happily practicing our careers as professors, we too were inspired to make future delegations to Nicaragua and future efforts in solidarity with the Cooperativa Martin Centeño part of our hopes for the future. □

Upon their return to Texas, Trinity students raised over \$2000 for Rio Blanco community projects.

Deprived of Simple Necessities

Belinda and Roland Hinmueller

... We visited a safe haven inside the dump that provides meals, assistance with school work and somewhere pleasant to be. ... It wasn’t long before we were having wheel barrow races, kicking around a ball, drawing and discovering a 1001 things you can do with dominoes. ...

This is not an easy place to visit. Driving through the entrance you see cows grazing on plastic, smoke and dust that swirls around and coats your body with a layer of grime, and amongst the machinery are adults and children digging for treasures they can cash in for money. On leaving, you instantly feel relieved to be nearing a shower, clean clothes, a tranquil and safe home; which is then followed by a pang of guilt, realizing these people are deprived of such simple necessities. □

Tandem cycling from Alaska to Argentina the Hinmuellers visited Quaker House where they learned about La Chureca. Read about their journey at www.cyclingwithsally.com.



Chureca boy washing from a jug

During 2010 Quaker Yearly Meetings, look for ProNica brochures and newsletters on information tables. If you would set out ProNica information at your YM, please let us know. Look for ProNica at Friends General Conference in July in Bowling Green, OH. □

ProNica supporters send donations ranging from \$5 to many thousands. All further efforts to assist our Nicaraguan project partners with programs of empowerment for families and communities. Thank you for your continued financial and spiritual support and assistance. □

This newsletter is available in print form; send your mailing address to the stateside office.

Cooperative Community

Samantha Morrison, Trinity delegate

Our group from Trinity University learned more in 12 days in Nicaragua than we had learned in weeks inside the classroom. ProNica gave us the opportunity to live at Cooperativa Martin Centeño. Among the many things we learned was the surprising amount of resources that coop members had because they worked together as a team. This was evident through the education system and division of labor and family responsibility throughout the community.

The community highly values education. Their leaders realized the importance of education and the opportunities it brings to the future of the cooperative. The community lobbied their local government for permission to begin their preschool and elementary school. To complete this project and produce a valuable education, the community donated their own personal books, toys, and learning materials to the school.

Teachers donated their time, placing most of their salary back into the school. Nearly all those graduating from the community elementary school go on to secondary school in the nearby town. Some even went on to pursue higher education in the larger city of Matagalpa. This illustrates the success of their education system that was made possible through the constant support of the community.



The division of labor and family responsibilities amongst the citizens of the cooperative reduced the work load for every member and allowed the tasks to be completed by those most skilled but for the benefit of everyone. For instance, collectively, the community owned a large herd of milking cows, but every morning only a handful of men would care for, feed, and milk the herd and then distribute the milk among all families in the community. Our group was pleasantly surprised at this collective approach to labor.

The family duty of childcare was dispersed amongst the family members so that I was often unable to distinguish which children belonged to the family's home I was visiting and which children had just come by unannounced. If the family ate, the neighborhood child ate as well. The children were never supervised while playing because it was common knowledge that if something happened amongst the children that required attention the nearest adult would solve the problem, whether it involved their children or not.



By taking responsibility for the welfare of one another's family, the citizens displayed a selflessness that we had rarely seen in the United States, and here that selflessness was being displayed in abundance. It was like nothing we had ever seen.

If I took one bit of knowledge out of this experience in Nicaragua, it is that we in the United States have many things to learn from Nicaraguans and others in the world. So often, we travel to countries such as Nicaragua as the privileged people, expecting to give back to those citizens of that country. But if we would only take a step back we would see that, in comparison, we are not the strong, knowledgeable people that we wish to be. The strong and knowledgeable are the Nicaraguans and others that have suffered and persevered. Other countries have so much to teach the US. If we are willing to take the time and give the respect necessary to learn from them, we would be the better for it. □

ProNica hosts delegations to educate others about Nicaragua. University professors and students spend from 7 days to 3 weeks experiencing culture, learning history and current conditions, performing service projects and living with host families. Contact the stateside office for more information.

ProNica provided \$200 for school supplies for Rama indigenous students in Greytown, Nicaragua. Rama families have little income in general and the beginning of the school year is always stressful when students require uniforms, shoes, backpacks and supplies. While the Rama students hope to one day be taught in their own language, currently they are taught in Spanish. If you wish to donate to educational projects, mark your donation check, "educaton."

CASA CUA'QUERA



Quaker House patio
in Managua, Nicaragua

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- * Name ProNica as a beneficiary in your estate planning. Contact us for details.
- * Friends Fiduciary Corporation has plans for now and later giving. Contact us for details.
- * Monthly gifts provide enduring/sustaining support for ProNica's Project Partners.
- * ProNica coordinates volunteers, work study delegations, Friends Witness Tours for groups of 4 to 6.

2010 Friends Witness Tours

8-18 October is full. So...
We added another tour.

5-15 November
Only \$950

includes all in-country transportation, lodging, meals, and excursion entry fees. Bring only souvenir money and your camera. Airfare to Nicaragua is still lowest in recent years. Learn about Nicaragua culture, economy, history. Visit ProNica Project Partners

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*Children
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future.
What
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Photographer Jim Spickard