



PRONiCA

News from Nicaragua

Published quarterly by the ProNica Committee of the Southeastern Yearly Meeting since 1987

Quakers Empowering Nicaraguans

Achuapa Library

Kate Irick, Haverford volunteer

Seated behind the desk of the Achuapa municipal library is the idyllic image of a librarian. In long-skirt with her hair pulled tightly back, Rafaela Valverde Guardado presents herself with the same professionalism expected by any Nicaraguan who takes his or her job seriously.

Rafaela, known to all as Payita, meets the needs of library patrons who range from school children, teenagers and university students to teachers, parents and rural farmers. In addition to providing individual attention to students, she offers activities, such as Reading Hour with small children, and serves as a resource for the community. Rafaela is also the cleaning lady, maintenance person and administrator.

On any afternoon, the library becomes a comfortable, lively place with a couple children on the floor assembling puzzles, others at tables reading, doing homework or studying. A couple of mischievous youngsters pretend to play chess. Thanks to the help of two members of the Achuapa community, the walls and outside of the library are painted a fresh new gleaming white and blue, and murals on each wall offer a welcoming face to all who enter the library. But wait for the sun or the rain or the pay check to come and the fragile existence of this humble edifice of learning begins to show.

With only one small working fan, the kids refer to the library in the summer time as an inferno, unbearable to even sit quietly and enjoy a book. Kids with asthma or respiratory problems, Rafaela says, cannot even enter the library to read or do homework during the summer.



The abandonment of the library by the mayor's office is evident by the virtually nonexistent funding for new books or resources that the library might receive. It is ProNica's long history of support and other international supporters that has brought the library's collection from 57 books almost 15 years ago to an impressive 3,800 books today. This is more than any local elementary or

high school in Achuapa. Even more scarce within the library's funding are resources to buy materials for art such as paper, colour pencils or crayons. Considering that a \$5 pack of plain white paper is 1/6 of Rafael's monthly salary sheds some insight into the hard-pressed economic circumstances that the library finds itself.



The history of the library's struggle permeates into the syllables of its

name, La Biblioteca Maria Felix Corea, in memory of a gifted young Achuapeña who died in a bus accident along with several other of Achuapa's most promising and talented youth in 1984. But the library clings to the promise of the creativity of its youth. Thanks to several dedicated and enthusiastic *Achuapeño* children, the library now boasts a bright and hopeful world map mural.

see **Library** on page 2

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September 2010 Vol 23 No 3

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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.

ProNica, Incorporated is a 501(c)(3) tax exempt corporation under the spiritual care of the Southeastern Yearly Meeting of the 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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Library from page 1 The necessity of ProNica's sustained commitment to this project is evident in that the library's most valued possessions—its books and its murals—are a product of the support of volunteers and donors to this library. There is still much room for growth. The leaning



bookcases, lack of a courtyard trash can and Rafaela's broken desk are only a few of the simple but greatly needed improvements to the library.

The sheer excitement that a sheet of blank paper and a colour pencil can bring to young faces here is an affirmation that there is light and potential for growth in a culture where the force of poverty works so furiously against the creative growth and education of its youth.

The continued investment in the minds and spirits of these children is essential in a landscape tucked into a forgotten corner of our world. But provide a book or some pencils and watch a little ray of light burst through the enclosure of mountains and destitution into a new world of hope. □

Kate personally raised \$1500 for the Achuapa library

Books for Life matches funds for library books and computers in Nicaragua. Libraries that collect \$2000 receive another \$3000 and two computers with software.

Your ProNica donations have improved libraries for the Yahoskas girls, for Los Quinchos in San Marcos, and in Acahualinca, Estelí, and Managua.

Thank you.

*We'll share reader comments in future newsletters.
Tuck your note in your next donation.*

Gift of Life

*in celebration or memory of a person or event
send a hand-calligraphied certificate
acknowledging your financial
donation to ProNica*

Mi Nicaragua Linda

Colleen Hotchkiss, Haverford volunteer

As my second summer with Grupo Venancia ends, I'm ready to go home, see friends and family, and start my senior year at Haverford. At the same time, I'll have some difficult goodbyes. I'll be leaving my host family, my coworkers and friends, this familiar city, and *mi Nicaragua linda* (my beautiful Nicaragua). This time I have no idea when I'll return. Last year, I was fairly certain I'd return this summer on another grant from Haverford's Center for Peace and Global Citizenship. Sure enough, here I've been.

But this time is different. After graduation I hope to travel on a Watson Fellowship for a year on an independent non-academic research project on permaculture and natural building methods. I would hope my travels bring me back to Nicaragua, but this uncertainty makes this departure a little bittersweet.

For nearly 20 years Grupo Venancia has worked for gender equality. As a popular feminist organization, its goals are empowering women, building networks between women and men, raising female autonomy, and working to communicate and educate in the city of Matagalpa and surrounding area. Last year I digitized 20 Venancia publications and created an online archive on their website. That project was concrete and entirely self-directed, allowing independent work, without relying on supervisor instructions or for tasks to be delegated.

This volunteer service was quite distinct from last year. This summer at Venancia I worked on an *observatorio* (study) of gender violence in the municipalities surrounding the city of Matagalpa. Venancia published a report last year on gender violence, and wants to continue to collect, compile, and analyze data from the different communities around Matagalpa, and publish a quarterly bulletin and a more in-depth annual report of the findings. My job was to redesign the *formato* (format) that the *promotoras* (community advocates) fill out in their communities and to create a guide for the compilation of data and for generation of statistics. These promotoras record facts about gender violence cases, including info about the victim/survivor, the accused perpetrator and their relationship, the crime, where the case is handled, what type of assistance the victim/survivor is receiving (accompaniment, consultation, or monitoring), and the status of the perpetrator, among other things. The purpose of this data is to determine patterns in judicial access for victims of gender violence, and how the promotoras can facilitate more access.

Working on the observatorio has been an eye-opening experience. Although I knew that impunity in gender violence crimes is prevalent, last year I was not confronted with such explicit and abundant proof. Working daily with this data has been sometimes emotionally challenging and reinforced my commitment to feminist activism. In my Gender and Sexuality Studies concentration at Haverford my classes were taught from a theoretical perspective. This internship added a very real and practical supplement to my academic work. It has been very important for me to get an

up-close hands-on experience directly dealing with the inequalities and injustices we feminists are working to eliminate.

This second year was different in other ways, too. I learned to work in a developing country non-governmental organization (NGO) with other international volunteers. The challenge of different expectations and miscommunication taught me valuable skills that will serve me well.

I'm really glad I returned to work with Grupo Venancia. It's been quite a different experience, both in terms of the difficulties I encountered and the presence of two other American volunteers (whereas last year I was



the only one). This helped my awareness grow of the challenges of working as a volunteer at an NGO. It has also been amazing to live with and grow closer to my same host family, especially host mom Jeaneth and host sister Jade. I've become so comfortable with them and am going to miss our teasing and joking. It's going to be really difficult to say goodbye, but hopefully I'll return in the not-so-distant future.

Nicaragua has a very special place in my heart. There's no way this will be the last time I come to this beautiful country. □

Become a ProNica Fan on Facebook

North Meets South

Murray Angus, Inuit delegation leader

It was not your typical group of North American college students!

In early May 2010, ProNica hosted a group of Inuit (a.k.a. Eskimo) youth from the far northern regions of Canada. The fifteen students spent two weeks traveling throughout the country,

learning about Nicaragua's history, culture and politics, and sharing their own unique culture.



Inuit youth from Canada's Arctic bear the heat but enjoy the warmth in Nicaragua

The fifteen students were enrolled in a special college program called Nunavut Sivuniksavut. In the Inuit language, Inuktitut Nunavut means "our land"; Sivuniksavut means "our future." Based in Canada's

capital, Ottawa, this program provides Inuit youth from remote Arctic communities an opportunity to live in a southern urban environment for eight months and to study their own history, politics and culture.

Each year, the students select a destination for their year-end trip. The purpose is to meet with other indigenous peoples and to share the story of their historic land claims agreement (signed in 1993) and the creation of the Nunavut territory in 1999, where Inuit make up the majority of the population. The class of 2009-2010 chose Nicaragua.

It didn't take long for the group's presence to be felt: on their first day in Nicaragua, they were guests on the country's two most popular television morning shows. In addition to answering questions about their homeland, they gave brief cultural presentations, which included drumming, singing, and throat-singing (a unique form of social entertainment between two women using rhythmic guttural throat sounds).

During the first few days in Managua, the students received various briefings on Nicaraguan history, politics, culture,

and the situation of indigenous peoples. They toured the city, and visited such places as Ben Linder House and the Sandino Museum.

We also paid a courtesy call to the Canadian Embassy, which hosted a social event for Canadian ex-pats and Nicaraguan friends. The students performed songs, demonstrated traditional Inuit sports, and answered many questions about Inuit and the Arctic.

One favourite stop in Managua was the factory where "Eskimo Ice Cream" is made – a favourite not only because of the name, but also because it had the coolest air conditioning in town! While the temperature in Nicaragua was 80+, the temperature back home was just above freezing.

A high point of our time in Managua proved to be the visit one evening to the Centro Cultural Batahola Norte, where they engaged in a wonderfully colourful and high-energy cultural exchange with Nicaraguan youth.



"It was absolutely great!" said student Alannah Johnston. "Just looking at the crowd you could see how happy they were to hear and watch us, especially the throat singing. They were so kind and cheerful and awesome."

One of the highlights was a visit to Los

Quinchos in San Marcos, an organization dedicated to helping former glue-sniffing street children. Los Quinchos, which is supported by ProNica, runs various projects, including a farm, cultural center and girls residence in San Marcos which the Inuit students visited. They played soccer with the boys at the farm, and took part in a cultural exchange of dances and songs at the end of their visit. The students were deeply touched at both the plight of the street children they met, and the impressive work that was being done to help them through Los Quinchos. Before leaving, they pooled their money and made their own donation to the project.

At the mid-way point of their trip, the students journeyed

over the mountains to the eastern side of the country. Two small planes ferried the group to Rosita, a small town in the area where indigenous peoples are the majority of the population. Visits were arranged to the villages of Wasakin, Fruta de Pan and Dubahill, three of the 14 Mayagna communities along the Bambana River. The students learned about the struggles of the people to maintain their lands and their culture. Each visit ended with an exchange of songs, dances and other cultural presentations. It was an eye-opener to see the strength of their communities when they had so little to work with.

The final leg of the journey was back on the western side of Nicaragua. One day was spent visiting Granada, the beautiful old city which is the best remnant of Spanish colonial times. The last encounter with Nicaragua's indigenous peoples took place in Masay, north of Managua, where the Inuit youth met with the Monimbo people. The event began with the hosts making some welcoming speeches, followed by some music, and dances by their young children. The Inuit students then performed their songs, drumming and throat songs in return.



Our final visit was to a development project in Managua that is run by a small Canadian organization, Casa Canadiense. We visited one of its local projects which supports a community organization that involves

neighbourhood kids learning traditional and modern musical instruments. They performed for us, and we did an impromptu performance in return.

Overall, the trip left a lasting impact on all participants. All of us were struck by the history and politics of Nicaragua (such things are not taught in Canada). The trip also made them more appreciative of the benefits they enjoy in Canada.

ProNica is to be commended for its commitment to helping North American youth learn about the realities of Nicaragua – past, present, and future. These initiatives are desperately needed to bridge the “ignorance gap” that exists. Lessons about global politics, and about people’s resilience to its harshest and crueler aspects, are both obtained in a very short time, thanks to ProNica’s effective work. □

For more information about the Nunavut Sivuniksavut program, go to www.nstraining.ca
For more stories and photographs about their visit to Nicaragua, go to www.nsinicaragua.blogspot.com

Ten Years of Solidarity and Empowerment

Lillian Hall

Achuapa was a rural village of peasant farmers and shopkeepers that was little known and largely ignored in its under-development. Heavy rains washed out the only access road. The only public phone had such poor service that ‘private’ conversations were heard through televisions. Horses and mules outnumbered vehicles 100-to-1.

After many magical evenings of music and poetry by local talent, I suggested a festival to community organizer and troubadour, Brígido Soza. Other local musicians, international solidarity workers, and leaders of the Juan Francisco Paz Silva Cooperative, ProNica’s project partner in Achuapa, joined and the first Achuapa International Music and Solidarity Festival in 2001.

The people of Achuapa organized and formed commissions to coordinate logistics, stage and sound, publicity, fundraising, and lodging. Artists painted signs and banners. Seamstresses sewed the flags of the countries to decorate the stage. Women cooked and sold food and beverages on the day of the event. With no hotel, Achuapans offered

spare beds and even hammocks free of charge. With that gesture, they challenged the assumption that solidarity is something that foreigners do for Nicaraguans via donations and projects, not something Nicaraguans do for foreigners.

At the first festival, local hillbilly bands performed Nicaraguan songs on simple or handmade instruments alongside singers from 14 different countries, mainly solidarity workers already in Nicaragua. A banjo-playing folk singer from Arizona flew down just for the festival. Internationally famous Nicaraguan singer-songwriter Salvador Cardenal performed. For the local musicians, some of them children, it was the greatest day of their life. Sometimes they sang a little out of tune, but they beamed with pride as thousands fervently applauded.

Achuapeños felt great pride over their international music festival, something even larger Nicaraguan cities didn’t have. Far from being a dusty town at the end of the road, Achuapa was now known positively by national media.

see Fest page 6

The music hadn't even ended that first night when people were already saying,

"This must be an annual event." The people led and we have followed. For ten years, the people of Achuapa make this festival happen. Somehow, it all comes together despite no fixed budget and many organizational challenges.

This year's 10th anniversary was less international than the preceding festivals. The festival was dedicated to singer-songwriter Salvador Cardenal, who died recently at age 49 after a lengthy illness. His sister Katia, with whom he formed Duo Guardabarranco, and with whom he sang in over 30 countries, joined us with her husband and fellow musician Moises Gadea. Houston guitarist Edward Grigassy flew down for the third time at his own expense. 90-year-



old Don Jose Adan Hernandez, local fiddle player and composer of one of Nicaragua's most famous folkloric

pieces, was joined by some of his children and grandchildren. Don Jose Adan has been with us in every festival with his musical family. Folkloric dancers performed every year. Los Hermanos Silva, a brother-sister duo and children of local a tenor, sang some of Salvador and Katia's songs.

It was especially touching to see these performances, with great emotion and poise, in tribute to Salvador. Ten years ago,

they were excited but nervous children. They grew up with the festival and have realized a dream, if only for a night. It has become an integral part of Achuapa. It's become the tuning fork of their lives. □

A Summer of Stories

Molly Minden, Haverford volunteer

"Tortilla with a little bit of salt is enough to ward off hunger in the mountains," Doña Mina informs me. Plenty of people died of bullets during the war, but no one died of hunger.

Over a hundred mothers crowd into the hallway. Though the music of torrential rain pounding the tin roof of the Gallery of Heroes and Martyrs in Estelí makes conversation nearly impossible, Doña Mina stands on a chair to address the women. She shouts instructions for receiving the new roofs that Daniel, as she affectionately calls the president, is generously providing a group of 100 mothers. "We want to hear your voices," she calls out to the mothers, "we are an organization of mothers and we must hear the voices of the mothers." They shout back what they are thinking. Doña Mina has petitioned both the local government and national party for these roofs. They were to arrive in April, then May, then June. Now October, they say.

At this monthly gathering the mothers chat about their lives, their children and grandchildren. They compare illnesses. Some bread circulates. Doña Mina spends 300 Córdoba of her own. The equivalent is less than \$15US, 20% of Doña Mina's monthly pension as a mother of a fallen soldier.

Doña Dora, one of the many mothers to frequent the Gallery, wanders in carrying a large plastic sack. "Buy my *rosquillas* (hard corn cookies)," she solicits. We sit and soak *rosquillas* in coffee. "Is it going to rain today?" she asks. It rains every day. We talk about arthritis and asthma and grandchildren. She loves her grandchildren. She is very proud of them; they are very grand indeed. "Do you talk to them about the revolution?" I wonder. "*Como no.*" (of course.) They understand the horrors of the war. That is why there will not be another.

The first time I met Doña Mina, she embraced me. "You have brought us another daughter," she smiled at the group. "We are so glad to have you, welcome." I smiled awkwardly. My service idea was called Digital Stories; it required filming the mothers as they told their stories. Doña Mina suggested that I could also translate the Spanish histories and biographies on the wall to English. They need to be digitized. All of this required a computer; my computer hard drive had just crashed.

Doña Mina comes to the Gallery every day, 8am to 5pm. She rocks back and forth in her favorite chair. Mothers come in to ask when the next reunion is – the last Friday

of the month – or how they can join and receive pensions and aid packets. Now an expert, Doña Mina knows whether they are eligible, how to apply for benefits, and attend meetings and protests. She asks about their families and they complain about the ailments of growing old – osteoporosis, varicose veins, sore and swollen feet. “I didn’t get my aid packet this month” a mother reports, a common problem about which Doña Mina constantly petitions the local government. Each month the mothers should receive a burlap sack with rice, beans, and other staples. The reality is - these come when they do.

Doña Mina both holds the organization together and personally supports the mothers. Twice a year, she travels from Estelí to



Managua, paying her own way, to bring the organization’s legal papers to the central government. After 7 years as Gallery coordinator, she’s ready to retire. But the mothers keep electing her. She raised the Gallery up and they recognize her work.

Before Doña Mina, the Gallery was *mierda* (shit). Near the central park, it had become a public toilet. People jumped over the front fence to sleep, urinate, dump trash, or steal fruit or memorabilia from the Gallery. The roof was falling in; the walls were grey with years of dirt, the pipes corroded. Doña Mina and her family found paint and decorated the walls themselves. They put up fencing to keep the *vagos* (vagrants) out. They fixed the pipes and replaced the roof.

Now the gallery boasts a garden with mangoes, guanabana, bananas, limes, and guayava – snacks for the mothers when

they visit. On the walls hang more than 700 photos, about half of the *jovenes* (youth) who lost their lives in Estelí alone. The others never had a photo taken.

When asked, Doña Mina tells about the war. She repeats her history of political action and losing a son. She tells of her early years of Sandinista collaboration, hiding papers in her underwear as she walked past the National Guard. For forty days she hid in the mountains, bringing food to her teenage son and nephew. She bundled cooked corn and beans under her clothes. Each time she shares her story, she remembers the pain. But she repeats it because remembering the past is important. People must know the pain and terror of living under a dictatorship, in a war zone. If people understand, they won’t let it happen again. Sometimes other mothers join her, sharing their stories.

Yet with all of the passion and time that Doña Mina donates to the Gallery, she has more visions for improvement. The paint on the Gallery’s murals is chipping; restoration would cost a fortune. Though she frequently pays for electricity and water from her own pocket, Doña Mina dreams of a window to welcome a breeze and visitors into the Gallery. She wants tables and chairs for people to take notes. She wants to sustain the memory.

To make ends meet, the Gallery runs a couple of programs – a Spanish school and a call-ahead *cafetín* (coffee shop). Because profits from these projects rarely cover all expenses, Doña Mina pays out of her monthly pension. Doña Mina’s commitment to the Gallery is total.

Yet, all of these sacrifices and commitments aren’t what I will remember. I will cherish these stories, sitting and drinking coffee. Because opening one’s life exposes all the routines, frustrations, and the normalcy of life. Doña Mina is extraordinary in her commitment, dedication and sacrifice. What most inspired me most is that she is just that: extra-ordinary. She talks about the war and the mothers and her asthma. As I volunteered in the Gallery, the mothers let me into their routines and daily events. That for me has been most important. Moments at the Gallery don’t have to be grand and life-changing to be profound. □

Please Help!

Jubilee House Community and the Center for Development in Central America creates worker-owned cooperatives in Nicaragua. The Genesis Spinning Cooperative, mostly women and a few men, built a factory to make organic cotton clothes for international fair trade markets. Factory equipment was purchased but has been held in transit. The shippers need public encouragement to complete delivery. Many letters, emails, phone calls will let them know that many are aware of their unnecessary delays. Learn more and how to help; visit www.jhc-cdca.org □

Find this newsletter (PDF with color images) on the News page at www.ProNica.org

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Quaker House patio
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October is full!

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Experience it yourself!



Children enjoy their
community library in Achuapa