



# PRONiCA

## News from Nicaragua

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*Quakers in Solidarity with Nicaraguans for 26 Years*

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## On "Karuna:" To Lessen Suffering

Laura Hopps, Program Director

There is a word in Pali, the language of the earliest Buddhist writings, karuna, that is often translated in English as "compassion." This is not an accurate translation, because while "compassion" means quite literally "to suffer with," karuna actually means "to take away or to lessen suffering."

What does karuna mean in the context of community work in Nicaragua? The nature of the work that people like Maria Elena and the team of women of Acahualinca commit themselves to, or Zelinda Roccio and Carlos Vidal and their staff at Los Quinchos, Adilia Vega and Maria Alarcon and their network of domestic violence advocates in Rio Blanco, and the other grassroots leaders ProNica accompanies, is heavy work. To be engaged in work with marginalized and oppressed groups means to turn towards the suffering that exists and work to lessen it.

It is out of great *compromiso*, (social commitment—also used in Nicaragua to refer to when people are engaged to be married; it connotes deep, long-term commitment), leaders of our partner communities accompany the most marginalized people in Nicaragua. They work with survivors of domestic violence and their families, street children discarded by society, women without access to contraception and adequate healthcare, women suffering from cervical cancer (a leading cause of death of women

in Nicaragua), improving access to education for rural farmers, prison inmates, and children in marginalized communities. They may at one time have been included in the groups above, and so have a deep understanding of the reality their constituents face.

It is common among activists and caregivers in Nicaragua, as well as the US (as many readers may have experienced themselves) for there to be an ethos of always giving to others and attending to others' suffering, to the neglect of one's own pain. There can be an ethos of "suffering with." An activist or caregiver who is too happy, centered, and peaceful, is clearly not committed enough. To be a true activist means to suffer, to be a martyr, constantly burned out and overstressed. But what does that mean for one's ability to be present with the suffering of others, or one's effectiveness in the long-term?

As Quakers, we understand the need, while in the midst of action for peace and justice, to build peace within. In the midst of suffering and facing the heartbreaking injustices, we can maintain an open heart. We can be

guided by the Light, to continually heal within so as to have more resources of kindness and generosity to give to others. This is karuna. If we don't have this, our work can easily be rooted in anxiety, outrage at the system, and



Carlos Vidal  
Co-director of Los Quinchos

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### ProNica Board

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

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

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 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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## Quaker House's Newest Residents

Welcome Rumi & Papaya!

We are pleased to welcome two new long-term residents to Quaker House. Meet Rumi. He's a 6 month old rabbit who came to us from the Quinchos boy's residential farm. Papaya is a turtle who came to us from Yanet, Acahualinca's Preschool educator. We are happy to have these two new residents in Quaker



Rumi before Meeting for Worship  
at Casa Cuáquera

House's garden to share with us the silent space of Meeting for Worship and remind us of our wider connection to our animal, plant, and reptilian friends. □

## Workplace Matching Contributions

Does your employer offer a charitable matching program? Many do; simply check with your human resources department.

Through your generosity, Nicaraguan social innovators are transforming lives and restoring dreams in their communities.

With a few simple arrangements, you may be able to double your personal investment in a more just world.

*Contact your HR department today!*



From *Karuna* page 1

other motivations that burn us out long-term. It is in taking care of ourselves internally that we have more resources to lessen suffering outside of ourselves as well.

Many of ProNica's grassroots partners understand this too. On a recent visit to Los Quinchos, Carlos Vidal commented that: "Today, we have only one psychologist on staff for over 300 kids in our projects. We don't have enough support for our kids, let alone our staff, who are in desperate need of psychological support themselves. We are managing with 15 full-time staff members as opposed to the 45 we had last year. In the past, we've had support groups for staff members, to share our struggles and work through issues, and we want to recapture that practice. We need to recapture that practice so that our staff doesn't get overwhelmed by the work. Our staff has also suffered traumas. Many were former street children, or had abusive childhoods. Just being in relationship with the kids, learning of the abuse they have suffered—and some 90% have been sexually abused, not to mention other forms of abuse—also impacts us deeply."

Maria Elena cautioned a recent delegation of Harvard Divinity School students, many among them involved in community work: "Learn from me. Take care of yourselves, especially you women! I've been in this work so long, and for many years I was so busy making sure that women in my community got access to healthcare, that I didn't have cervical cancer screening done myself. When I finally got screened decades later, I was diagnosed with cervical



Maria Elena at the Acahualinca  
Preschool graduation

cancer. I'm lucky to be alive. In the midst of taking care of others, you must take care of yourselves."

As our grassroots partners continue their struggles for healing, human rights, education, health, and a dignified life for people in their communities, it is my hope that ProNica's support can be so bountiful that we can support services for beneficiaries in all of the eight partner communities, as well as care for the caregivers, so they may continue their work for many years to come.

In Acahualinca, many of the staff's salaries are still not covered for 2013. ProNica recently was able, thanks to a generous donation, to cover the psychologist's salary for the year. Another generous donor has contributed towards the Preschool Director's salary. Many other staff members however, including Maria Elena and ten others, are currently working without pay.

Since the economic downturn in 2008, aid to Nicaraguan has gone down every year. ProNica has remained committed to the work here since 1986. Please help us to remain here, firmly in support of Nicaraguan grassroots communities, by giving in unrestricted funds so that we may direct funds where they are most urgently needed. We rely not on large foundation grants, or as Carlos Vidal says "financial monsters" that impose prohibitive restrictions on our partners, but on the generosity of individual donors and supporters.

*Your gift can help ProNica send the message to our partners: "We are here with you now in these tough economic times, more committed than ever, and we will continue to walk in solidarity with you, to support you in lessening suffering in your communities." □*

## Los Quinchos—Miguel—Age 17

Sydney Stieler & Hannah Bowen, Volunteers

**Role:** Miguel is a Los Quinchos instructor for the boys' hammock and bread-making classes. He also helps supervise the children.

**His story:** Miguel is from León and entered the project in 2008. His grandmother entered him *el Filtro* (the Filter) program when he was twelve because she was worried about the people he was hanging out with. At fourteen, he moved to Grenada and responded very well to the activities, such as dance, hammock-making, ceramics, and carpentry. So the Quinchos administrators asked him to work in San Marcos. He is currently enrolled in both secondary school and trade school for administration. He also works in a restaurant.

**Why stay?** "Los Quinchos has given me the opportunity to overcome my limitations. Now I'm motivated to study and work, and before I didn't want to. I like to work with these kids because I know what they've been through, so I can relate to them. I used to be one of them." □

# The Valor of Vicente

Jared Oubre, Harvard Divinity School

His smiling face and warm handshake greeted us all as we stepped out onto the dirt road and followed him to his outdoor dining room. His young daughter, smiling, welcomed us with a traditional Nicaraguan dance she had taught herself by watching dancing on television. In their outdoor kitchen his wife was preparing mixed rice, washing vegetables from their garden, and creating a unique tropical juice for dinner. We toured their small organic coffee plantation and learned about Vicente's hope and concerted effort to live in harmony with nature.



Vicente Padilla's daughter

Conservation methods, such as rain water catchment systems, healthy worm composts, coffee pulp composts, bottle recycling bins, bio fertilizers, natural pesticides, and a dedicated farming family, showed that this man, his wife, and five children were intent on being responsible stewards of the Nicaraguan countryside.

Many neighboring coffee farms in this northern region of Nicaragua, near Matagalpa, produced high quality coffee for export, but the poor practices of applying chemical pesticides and large scale mono-cropping, depleted nutrient rich volcanic soils. However, the small Padilla family business, set on 10 acres of land, is an exception because their first priority is the health of the land. They want to be an example unto all who visit of what environmental sustainability looks like in its complete practice. In addition to their cash crop the family raises a cow that produces 12 liters of milk a day, a horse, chickens, and two well-trained pit bulls Vicente uses for breeding purposes. Dispersed among hundreds of hand nurtured coffee trees are some 400 fruit plants, 80

medicinal plants, and an enormous bamboo thicket where sloths are often spotted resting high up in the trees. Even the dinner ingredients that night for all 16 visitors were harvested from the diverse and well cared for land.

Vicente says, "The University is my life and the earth is my school." His hands are in the soil every day, and even though he never finished his primary education, he knows that he can learn a lot through careful observation of the natural environment that surrounds him. Proudly standing alongside him is one of his sons, who is studying to become an agronomist. All five of his children hope to complete college and become professionals someday. Vicente confidently shared that, "sometimes theory is good, but practice is always better." We group of university students chuckled! Often we flood our lives with readings and writings that are not thoughtfully connected to the daily experiences we live. Education can teach us to become more critical thinkers; however, at some point we have to practically apply what they have learned. As a result, Vicente is constantly applying his knowledge by consistently improving his land in order to cultivate healthier crops.

Vicente's land was almost robbed from him two decades ago after the Sandinista Revolution. Wealthy land owners hired the best lawyers to falsify land rights documents. When Vicente fought back, proving ownership of the land with the help of a US nonprofit, his life and his family's lives were threatened by corrupt military officials. They



Vicente giving students a tour of his coffee plantation

arrested him and one of his sons in the middle of the night, beat them, and demanded they move from their land. Vicente comments that, "My religion helped me to refrain from violence." In fact, his faith sustained him during these trying times as

he endured oppression like many small scale farmers in his community. His courage, refusal to do anything with less than his best effort, and respect for his land made a lasting impression upon our group that evening. Indeed, Vicente Padilla is on the top of my hero list. □



## Servicio

Nola Haynes, Harvard Divinity School

There were many standout moments to reflect on and share from our delegation, but the theme or feeling that has stayed with me was the ability to witness social justice lived and practiced in Nicaragua. For years, I have dedicated my life to serving others. I wholly admire and adhere to the social justice legacies of Mother Teresa, Dorothy Day, Dr. Martin Luther King, Gandhi and Padre Ernesto Cardenal, along with selfless other s/heroes. In Nicaragua, I witnessed acts of selflessness, love and courage. I learned about the social justice legacies of Quakers and *campesino* (peasant) communities. The campesino mantra of “see, judge, act” was visible, a tangible good that propelled a country to attempt to eek out its own socio-politico-religious narrative.

Each organization we visited or activist we encountered shared a common goal of responding to the greater need. When we met and spoke with Padre Cardenal, he was very open about all of humanity having a shared human responsibility regardless of rank or station. I do not want to draft a picture of complete harmony of what I encountered in Nicaragua. In fact it was the messy mosaic steeped in strife, political unrest, poverty, and natural disasters that textured my experience. It was through the weight of pain that I encountered love, courage, faith, and a tremendous commitment to community.



HDS students listening intently to an activist

Intellectually I tell people that I visited Nicaragua to study Liberation Theology on the ground; that it was an opportunity to witness how theory and praxis can co-exist. In truth, I traveled to Nicaragua because I was called to do so. As an American Catholic, I questioned my religion, perhaps even my faith for myriad reasons. One night as I attended mass in Batahola, I realized faith exists in many forms, and the ways I embody faith is through service. While traveling to Matagalpa, I rode with ProNica Program Director, Laura Hopps, in her truck because I was ill. I witnessed first-hand the amount of time she dedicated to planning our trip. Through the graciousness of ProNica and Laura’s tireless and meticulous planning of hosting 14 privileged Americans, it was doubly confirmed for me; faith is about works, regardless of rank or station. On this trip, I learned to shed the guilt of privilege and get busy working in the global community I am apart of. □

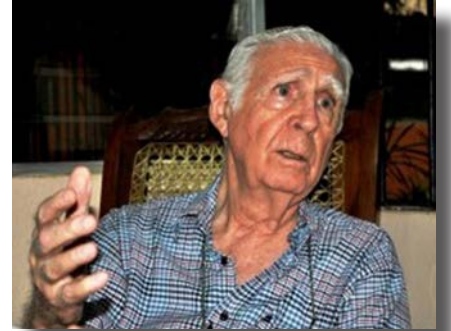
## On the Blessings of Nicaragua

Desirée Bernard, Harvard Divinity School

On one of our last nights in Nicaragua, meeting in a circle on the Quaker House patio, the fourteen of us from Harvard Divinity School reflected on what we would share about our “delegación” with our university community upon return. My first thoughts were of the people, especially one.

Father Fernando Cardenal gave us advice on our last full day as a group in Nicaragua.

He said, first, to stay connected in community. When one is connected with others and not isolated, it makes the possibility of progress much



Father Fernando Cardenal

more vital and accessible. Also, he said, to think of our children who, perhaps ten years from now, will be asking us the question: Where were you, Father? Where were you, Mother, when this or that event was transpiring in history? You want to be able to say you were there, said Father Cardenal. You want to make them proud.

Finally, he told a story of a person who was dying and bemoaning the sense of leaving this world with “hands empty.” What he meant by this, he explained, was that this dying person was suffering with existential anguish because they felt they had not done anything important, anything that mattered, with their life. Father Cardenal warned us not to end up this way. Do not die with your hands empty, he said, do something that matters. When I interpret this in my own way, with my own words, I hear this great Jesuit priest—this man who stood with the poor and refused to turn his back on them, even when it meant sacrificing much in his own life and who, together with his companions, accomplished great things for the people of Nicaragua—telling me, use your hands to give, to serve, to be of use to others. Do not exist just for yourself. Join with others and serve others. This exchange from one hand to another, this giving, is the practice that generates a sense of our life as an offering when it comes time to die. This is what brings ultimate peace. Our hands are not empty because they are full of our offering. This offering to our fellow human beings, to the people of our communities, to the poor, is also our offering to God.

From the encounters with individuals living in ways that exemplify such theology, I came home full of gratitude and a desire to carry that blessing forward. □

# When Our Support Counts Even More in the Acahualinca Neighborhood

Professor Meredith McGuire, Trinity University

Nothing I could have said, back in the classroom in San Antonio (Texas), could have fully prepared the 15 Trinity University students for the barrage of sights, sounds, and experiences of those first 36 hours: street vendors (including children) hawking snacks and drinks from the middle of the four-lane highway into the city, the fumes of many diesel trucks and busses, a family of four on a single bicycle threading their way through the honking traffic, a drill team and percussion-heavy marching band practicing in the street outside Quaker House, firecrackers shot off nearby, blaring loudspeakers of a morning milk delivery truck, and the oppressive heat of the last day before the rainy season began in Managua.



Lake in La Chureca - 2008

After briefly settling into Quaker House, we headed for *La Chureca* (The Dump). Threading through narrow lanes bustling with garbage trucks and horse-drawn carts, our minibus made its way to shacks at the far end of the dump. This was my third visit to La Chureca and the surrounding Acahualinca neighborhood, so I knew how much the place had changed since 2008. My students' first impressions were still the images of appalling, grinding poverty contrasting with evident cheer and hope. But, in many respects, the improved appearance of the dump belied much of the hidden violence that was still going on, leaving many residents of Acahualinca worse off in the near future.

In 2008, when I first visited, there was no landfill—only mountains of trash on the banks of the lake, with numerous smoldering fires, spewing dioxins, black carbon, and other deadly pollutants into the air. Phantom-like figures wandered in the smoke, bandanas covering their noses and mouths, as they poked recyclable trash into their bags. Covering the waste with layers of dirt and preventing the fires have undoubtedly improved health conditions for people living anywhere near this notorious dump. The well-meaning project (largely funded by the Spanish government) is, however, an example of top-down development projects that often fail to listen to the collective voice of the affected community. Even before the recent financial crisis, donor countries poured money into “improvements” that were not supportable without a lot of

outside funding. With that funding disappearing, how can the local community organizers possibly continue services and, now, make up for the lost support for the projects that foreign development organizations began?

The afternoon of that first day in Managua, our group returned to Acahualinca to visit the Center for the Promotion and Development of Women—Acahual. The students heard a rousing testimony by a woman who had been helped by the Center's psychologist to cope with, and later end, an abusive marriage and alcoholism. The bustling clinic and pharmacy also were heartening evidence of how much a low-budget, grassroots community organization can accomplish. Before the worldwide financial crisis, the women who lead the Center had dreams of a program for neighborhood girls to prepare them, socially as well as educationally, for the kinds of jobs that could actually lift them out of poverty.

Now, with external funding disappearing fast, they are hard pressed to keep offering the services—like the psychologist who helped the woman we met, the educational and medical programs to try to reduce maternal mortality, and the educational and legal services for dealing with domestic violence and sexual abuse.

Leaving the Center after this third visit, I was doubly glad that ProNica supports this grassroots effort (and the efforts of the Quinchos). ProNica listens to the voice of the people who are in touch with their needs and already working to meet them, so we can be confident that every cent of the money that Trinity students raised for the benefit of



Lake in La Chureca - 2012

Nicaraguan women's health will be well used by the Center. At the same time, however, I was profoundly moved by how much

greater the need in Nicaragua is now, as so-called “market-based” development is failing around the world and rich countries, like the USA, hesitate to use their wealth to help less privileged people. Precisely when US economic uncertainty makes it harder for donors to keep giving, we need to renew our solidarity. Our support counts more now. □



# Agricultural Innovation at the Martin Centeno Community

Hannah Bowen, Volunteer

My friend Sydney and I had the pleasure to visit Martin Centeno, an impressively strong, unified, and organized community just outside of the town of Rio Blanco. A highlight of our visit included Sunday morning mass, a very unique collaboration of all types of community members. Youth from the community read passages from the Bible and provided joyful, uplifting instrumental accompaniment to the singing in which everyone participated. Several different community members, both men and women, preached, leaving the floor open to anyone to share comments about their messages. It was truly a community space, with a very welcoming and participatory atmosphere.

This community has received funding from ProNica for 3 years for various community projects, most recently including the repair of a bridge, repair of 25 latrines, maintenance of a community kitchen, and the establishment of a community garden.

The people of Martin Centeno were relocated to their current community and given land during the contra war in 1984 as part of the Sandinista Agrarian Reform, and as a measure of protection from several other remote mountainous areas that had become war zones. As mandated by the Sandinista government, this community operated as a cooperative, producing beans, corn, cacao, and other crops. Without the support of the Sandinistas in the 1990's, the cooperative struggled to function, as many members left the community to look for more land during the economic crisis. Although land is no longer shared, the people of Martin Centeno continue to work together to maintain a happy and healthy community.

ProNica provided start-up funds for a community garden in Martin Centeno. (See Interview for details )

## *How did this Project begin?*

There was interest within the community to produce vegetables here in our community for our own consumption and sale. We began as 11 families, all sharing the responsibilities of seeding, watering, and maintenance

on about one acre of land. We tried growing tomatoes, peppers, and cucumbers. But, the river runs right next to the land we were cultivating, and because of poor soil and contamination from the river, very little germinated, and what did was very weak.

## *How did you decide to resolve that problem?*

We decided to try planting beans, as well as some squash and watermelon. We figured that the beans would fix nitrogen and improve the soil so that next year we can try again with other crops. Squash and watermelon are crops

that need more attention, so we planted less of these. We also downsized. Now only 5 families are involved.

## *How did you get access to this land?*

This is my father's land, and it used to be for cattle. He is a farmer too, and has had more success with tomatoes and peppers. He is letting the community use it to produce what we can.



Children of the Martin Centeno Community

## *How is the work divided, and how much will each family receive?*

Each family involved has a certain day of the week where they visit the crops. When the harvest comes, we will process the beans together, and we will divide the beans and other products equally among the five families. Then, each family can decide to sell and consume what they want. We will sell it to families here in our community, or in the market in Rio Blanco.

## *Are there any other community agricultural projects in Martin Centeno?*

In this same parcel of land, we harvest fruit from the Nancite trees that are planted here, and sell them within the community. Each tree produces from 50-80 pounds of fruit each season. We would like to reforest the riparian zones with cacao to prevent erosion, as well as generate income. We are working on receiving cacao trees through a women's agricultural cooperative. Also, thinking of the future, we would like to plant some hardwood trees such as Cedro, so that our children and grandchildren will have a product to sell. We have access to land, but not to funds. □

*To support the Martin Centeno Community's reforestation efforts,  
earmark your contribution: MC Reforestation.*

*Casa  
Cuáquera*



José and Panchita welcome you

### **Quaker House**

Hospitality house offers travelers simple lodging in Managua. Located in a quiet residential neighborhood, convenient to shopping, banks and restaurants. Individuals, groups, meeting space, wifi, fully equipped kitchen or catering available.

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