



PRONiCA

News from Nicaragua

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

Quakers in Solidarity with Nicaraguans for 27 Years

June 2014

Vol 27 No 2

Acahualt's Work is Severely Hindered with Loss of Primary Funder

By Valerie Snow and Naila Ijaz, Haverford College

"As a survivor of domestic violence and cervical cancer, I am here to tell women that if I got through it, they can too."

~Maria Elena Bonilla, Acahualt Director

On the first day of our delegation to study reproductive health and justice in Nicaragua, we arrived in Acahualinca—a community that, until recently, scraped a livelihood by picking recyclables from the country's largest trash dump. Visiting the Acahualt Women's Clinic in Managua's poorest neighborhood introduced a motif that we would continuously crop up: regardless of socioeconomic circumstances or levels of formal training, a few committed individuals identified a problem, banded together, and made a real difference in their communities.

Our host was Maria Elena Bonilla, a natural raconteur and director of the clinic since its opening in 1992. In the early years, Maria Elena and the other founders hadn't even earned high school diplomas, and the clinic just provided basic gynecological healthcare. Since then, all the founders have graduated from college with various applicable specialties, and today Acahualt's programs include general health care, sexual health education, family planning, legal aid, psychological services, a beauty school, and a community preschool. In addition, Maria Elena and the other dedicated staff and volunteers work extra hours and put themselves at risk to ensure that their

services meet the needs of many different populations, including young people in nightclubs and sex workers in motels and bars.

Despite the positive benefits of these programs, the clinic lost ninety percent of their revenue when the Spanish aid agency that was their primary funder pulled out of Central America during the recent global economic recession. Now, ProNica remains one of their only steady sources of funding, but

without additional donations their programs and outreach will remain severely constricted. We were saddened to hear this and hope that the clinic can continue to operate on more than the dedication and sacrifice of its staff and volunteers.

We were struck by the impact that this small group of women could make. Like so many of the groups we learned from

over the course of our trip, these women

simply decided to take matters into their own hands, and they improvised around obstacles that would have halted others.

Maria Elena's narrative of the history of Acahualt Women's Clinic showed us the truth in a quote by Margaret Mead, displayed on a sign in the Casa Cuáquera (Quaker House) where we stayed in Managua: "Never doubt that a small group of thoughtful, committed citizens can change the world. Indeed, it's the only thing that ever has." □



Acahualt Women's Center Team

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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.

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Weighty Friend, Essential Guide

By Melissa Ajabshir, ProNica Executive Director



Caroline Lanker
ProNica Financial
Specialist

We are blessed to have Caroline Lanker's financial care of ProNica. Her gifts of expertise, time and striking attention to detail are invaluable.

Caroline is an ever patient teacher for the staff, an artful practitioner of Quaker Process, and a staunch supporter of our witness in Nicaragua.

We are frequently complimented about our financial stewardship, and

much of that we owe to Caroline. She's a gem, and we're so glad to have her on the team. □

Legacy Giving

A legacy gift offers you a lasting and meaningful bond with ProNica.

Through your humanitarianism, Nicaraguan social innovators effectively combat the challenges of extreme poverty in their local communities.

With a few simple arrangements, your life will impact this bold form of peacebuilding well into the future.

And of course, bequests, endowments and other forms of planned giving are wise benevolent investments.

Contact us today:
stateside@pronica.org or 727-821-2428

Correction from March Newsletter



Hopi Spirit
by Mary Ray Cate 2013

We were delighted to run a story in our March 2014 Newsletter about ProNica supporter, Mary Ray Cate, her commitment to social change, and her long-held support of ProNica's solidarity model of community development. Regrettably, we printed the incorrect URL of her website where you can purchase her art in the forms of notecards, prints and advent calendars, with proceeds benefiting her favorite organizations, including ProNica. The correct URL for her website is:

<http://www.sunlit-art.com>

At Las Yahoscas, "It's Never Too Late to Have a Happy Childhood"

By Megan Couillard, Rutgers University

I barely stepped a foot past the wrought iron gates when I was greeted by hugs and cheek-kisses. I was at Las Yahoscas, the branch of Los Quinchos reserved for girls who have been abused or were living on the streets of Nicaragua. I walked around with Erik, the staff psychologist, and he showed me the site, stopping every few feet to ask the girls how they were doing. They adored him, and it seemed like they trusted me by association. Erik warned me what to expect from the average girl in the program: cases of abuse, poverty, and suffering seemed to be the cheerless standard. While I was there, they would tell me snippets of their history when they felt like sharing. I was careful to never ask for more information, in case the girls were very purposefully omitting information for my sake or theirs.

On my second day, one girl sat next to me as I waited outside the Los Quinchos office. She had a marker, and she was drawing on the back of her hand as we talked. She then crossed her legs on the bench, showing me a fading black heart on the inside of her calf. She explained how she used to cut herself. She was depressed, destroyed by her circumstances, and she carved a heart into her skin one night. It was now completely healed, only a raised outline of a scar remained. She said she liked to trace over her scar now. Whether it was to cover it or remind her of it, I'm not sure.

All of a sudden, the dark moment was over. A neighborhood dog walked by, and she popped up to play with it. She instantly reverted into an average preteen, playing fetch with a dog and laughing with her friends. My time with the girls was filled with these sorts of contradictions; terrible past experiences overshadowing the light happiness of youth.

Another girl told me about how she had been admitted into the program only a couple months prior. She lived with her mother and grandmother, the father long since removed from the picture. Within a month of each other, her two caretakers passed away, seemingly inexplicably. She has four siblings, all ten or more years older than she is. She told me how she asked to live with them, but how they were all too busy to take care of her. She didn't sound angry, and even boasted about how well her siblings were doing with their young families. She went on to talk about how she also used to cut herself, echoing the first girl's sentiments, and showed me the thin pale lines running up and down her forearms. It was startling how matter-of-factly she told me her story, like she was reading from a

textbook. Five minutes later, she was talking about the boys at school and showing me her array of intricately woven bracelets, one with the faces of Homer and Lisa Simpson knotted into the threads.

On one of my last days there, one of the girls walked up to me and hugged me tight. I heard a little mousy voice say, "I'm sad." I asked her why, and got more of an answer than I ever could have anticipated. She missed her baby cousins, who were living with their verbally and physically abusive mother. The girl told me how her aunt would mistreat them all, calling them names and hitting them, and how her aunt sold her into prostitution when she was seven years old. I wanted her to continue her story, wishing feebly that understanding her past situation would make her current one any better, but lunch was being served. She darted off to eat rice and stew off of cracked plastic plates.

Over lunch, she and her friends asked me a million fun, innocuous questions. What's my name in English? What's snow like? Can you translate this poem for a boy I like? Again, I saw this sharp contrast between adult-sized tragedy and the simple joys and infinite curiosity of youth.



Megan at Las Yahoscas

During my stay in Nicaragua, I watched several delegations come and visit the girls at Las Yahoscas and the boys at La Finca. While they would run and play with the boys, they were invariably more cautious with the girls. The members of the delegations didn't integrate into the group as fast, didn't talk as much, didn't play as actively. I think it's because visitors see the girls as too delicate, or see them as people that you have to be more careful around because of what they've been through. However, these girls are survivors. Despite their past suffering and hardship, they're continuing on a good path with Los Quinchos. We jumped rope, played dozens of games of hide-and-seek, and climbed the flexible boughs of Mandarin trees. We had tea parties, danced to the radio, and gossiped about boys. We laughed and laughed and laughed.

As author Tom Robbins has said, "It's never too late to have a happy childhood." That's the beauty of Las Yahoscas. There exists a place for the girls where they can bask in the joy, simple happiness, and extraordinary possibility of youth. They don't have to pretend that their misfortunes never existed, but they can move on and remember what it feels like to just be a kid. □

Through “The Shoe Project,” We’re Bringing our Partners to You

By Kathy Hersh, ProNica Board Member

At our board meeting and retreat with our ProNica partners last December in Nicaragua, we heard over and over how much it meant to them for us to be there. We learned that our presence was as important an expression of solidarity and commitment to our mission as the grants we give. The people we work with are more than recipients of aid; they are valued colleagues in the struggle to remove the causes of war and create the Peaceable Kingdom on earth as best we can.

We wish we could bring them to the United States to meet our partner donors or take you all to Nicaragua to see the good work being done and the



During the workshop, participants read first person accounts and literally stand in the shoes of ProNica partners and individuals impacted by their work

work that remains to be done with your continued support. What we decided we could do is bring you their stories, their photos, and a pair of their shoes for you to try on, to stand in, as you read the words from their hearts. We have been calling this “The Shoe Project.” Eventually, we will come up with a better name which will more adequately convey the impact these stories have on those who hear them.

Meanwhile, we continue to listen and collect stories from the Nicaraguan reality to share with the wider world. □

Read the story of “Miranda Gutierrez” in The Shoe Project story below.

The Acahualt Women’s Center Helped Me Escape Life as Sex Worker

By “Miranda Gutierrez” (translated from original Spanish)



I was part of the “Sunflower” program at the Women’s Clinic of Acahualinca [for sex workers]. I was involved in the program for more than 14 years, receiving talks about health, prevention, and self-esteem. We were a community of support for one another. We had health exams there, and support for us as women.

I lived in an abusive relationship for almost 20 years. I had 9 children with him, and he beat me and abused for all that time. He didn’t know I lived the lifestyle that I did, but I did what I had to do to feed my children because he didn’t work. He thought that I made money making tortillas, but that wasn’t all I was doing. Before, I couldn’t talk about all that I lived through, but I can now. When I separated from my abuser, I continued in that lifestyle on the street. I had to support my 9 children. I had no other option. That lifestyle is very difficult—easy to get into, and very

difficult to escape. You can want to get out of that, but at the same time you see all the needs of your children and you don’t want them to go hungry. Sometimes I would sneak out at night when my kids were sleeping, and they never knew.

Today, I am content, and I’ve been happily married for 15 years now. I was able to overcome that abuse and escape that lifestyle because of the support of the Women’s Clinic of Acahualinca and for the support of the entire staff who helped me. When I finally left my abuser, he threatened to kill me, but the director [Maria Elena] went to the house with me to take photographs of him, so that the police would have his photo in case he killed me. That scared him, so he didn’t do anything after that. Those women are fearless in standing up for women.

I’m a different person today. I know that I have rights and I tell other women who are living with violence that there are women’s centers like Acahualinca that can help them break the cycle. They don’t have to live like that. □

If you would like to deepen your group’s experience of solidarity with our partner organizations in Nicaragua but you can’t make it in person, we’ll be happy to bring “The Shoe Project” to you. The interactive workshop gives your group a chance to hear the stories of the people who do the work your contributions make possible and whose lives have changed because of it. For details, contact us at: 727-821-2428 or stateside@pronica.org

Circles of Support Continue to Expand for Casa Materna

By Kitty Madden, Friends of Casa Materna Board Member

At the time of my sister Mary's death in 2004, she left me an amazing gift, a gift that was also a "wake up call." Mary was just 67 and, as wife, mother, grandmother, sister and nurse, was such a vital person for all of us. As I grieved her sudden death, I could hear her whispering to me, "And so, Kitty, what makes you think that you will live forever?"

Mary and her husband Jon also knew what it was to grieve the loss of a baby. Reaching the end of her fourth pregnancy at age 37, Mary was at the hospital in full labor and ready to deliver when her uterus ruptured. Emergency measures were not able to save her son Matthew but we were all deeply grateful that Mary survived. No wonder then that she and Jon were among the first friends of the Casa Materna in 1991 when we initiated this vital service for rural mothers with high-risk pregnancies.

It was Mary's death in 2004 that put me on the path of carefully reviewing my roles in 1) the Casa Materna in the northern highlands of Nicaragua and 2) on the board of Friends of the Casa Materna (FCM) in Michigan. Since the Casa's beginning in 1990, I had served as a key bridge person and fund/friend-raiser as we developed a space of safety and support for mothers needing to birth in the Regional hospital. A key goal for all of us was the reduction of the extremely high rate of maternal death in Nicaragua. In 1990 when the Casa Materna MAJ began, the rate was 190 deaths/100,000 live births and by 2012, maternal death had been reduced to 50/100,000.

With a goal of ensuring that the work of FCM will go on at the time of my death, the FCM board formed a Transition Committee to help me define the various parts of my work as a volunteer in order for these functions to be shared among many. Key in this transitioning process has been developing Circles of Support.

Throughout the years, a number of churches and organizations – ProNica being a shining example – have in fact functioned as FCM/CM circles of support, both by their support of our mothers and staff and by the ways in which they have linked us with others. Thus, it seemed natural to build on this organic foundation to ensure that our fundraising and educational outreach would extend

beyond the efforts of our dedicated FCM board.

We are happy to say that we now have more than 17 active Circles of Support throughout the United States, Nicaragua, Ireland and Ecuador, and the number keeps growing. In an initial gathering/training of leaders from 7 circles last September, it was energizing for all to exchange ideas for fundraising and unique educational approaches while also developing new friendships.

As you know, ProNica has actively supported the Casa Materna's efforts to include family planning as an integral part of our

educational and service programs. Now, it is so gratifying to welcome back to the Casa Materna mother after mother who announces to all some variation of the following: "I was here 11 years ago when our first child was born, and my husband and I have been doing family planning. I gave birth to one other child at our rural health center. And now, after this next birth, we are planning that I will have a tubal ligation."

Our gratitude to all of you for the ways in which you are helping to decrease maternal death here in Nicaragua! □

*In memory of
Mary Madden Peters*

1937-2004



Mother, baby and Kitty Madden at the Casa Materna

"When people gather in circles, when we reveal ourselves by speaking from the heart, we discover common threads, common concerns, common longings."
~from Christina Baldwin's **Calling the Circle**

I've Traveled to Many Countries, But My Time in Nicaragua was Different

By Laura "Lo" Alviti, Eckerd College

I love to travel. If there is one thing I know about myself for sure, it is my joy for exploring and seeing new places, faces, and experiences. The sense of awe and fulfillment I get from traveling is addicting. Each time I go somewhere new, I fall in love. My time in Nicaragua, however, was much different. The knowledge I gained about myself, the people and their struggle, and the natural beauty was so much more powerful than anywhere else I have been. Nicaragua absolutely captivated me. The country changed the way I think and the way I lead my life.

Although we spent some time in more traditional educational settings, having lecturers and taking notes, I found that the most valuable information came from experiencing and seeing it directly or conversing with those who had. For example, hearing Manuel, our driver, speak about his part in the Sandinista Revolution made everything that we read and heard seem much more real. The insight he gave us on life during those times illuminated the struggle more than words on a page ever could. Also, exploring the mangroves and seeing each difference in species helped me learn the local ecology better than simply reading about it.

The difference between want and need became apparent to me during my time in Nicaragua. Here is a country where people are fighting daily for their basic needs, such as food, water, and shelter. This is radically different from the life I have experienced. Seeing how people can still be happy without all the excess material goods in their lives changed my perspective. Leading a simpler life, one can find happiness in things that do not need to be purchased. This is not to say that people do not desire to improve their lives, but that they can still find happiness in what they have, even if it is less than others. This is something I hope to achieve in my life after this trip. It also made me realize that taking some of my excess, whether it's time or money or goods, and helping those who really need it is important. Seeing how we improved Doña Juanita's life by installing the eco-stove for her family was heartwarming. All we had to do was give our time and hard work, no fancy gadgets or high class clothes.

A part of the overwhelming love I feel for Nicaragua stems from the natural beauty and those willing to preserve it. Traveling through the mangroves, staring out at the vast Pacific Ocean, hiking through the cloud forest, and wandering through Jaime's and Vicente's farms are all moments when I realized what an incredible place we were in. Hearing what Vicente had to say about his work on the farm and the importance of permaculture without chemicals was like a reflection of my own thoughts. Many times I have wondered if humans can really live in peace with the environment around them and here was the proof I had been looking for. Also hearing about the progress made through preserving habitats such as the Reserva la Flor for the sea turtles and the Poneoya Mangroves gave me hope for our ongoing battle with environmental damage. I spoke to a friend's mother after returning to the U.S. who

had lived in Nicaragua for some time. I told her about Reserva la Flor and she was surprised and happy to hear about it. During her time there, so much focus was on the war being waged, there were no resources for nature preserves. The progress being made towards the protection of the environment is a source of hope for me

One evening, picking up trash along the Poneoya beach, I paused to watch the sunset. No exaggeration, it was the most beautiful sunset I have ever seen. Watching the sun sink lower and lower towards

the incredibly vast horizon over the Pacific rendered me speechless. I actually dropped to my knees from

the beauty of it. The sun got bigger as it approached the point where it would disappear. I now realize that this is the perfect analogy to my love for Nicaragua. As the journey progressed, my love for the people and the place grew and continued growing right up until our moment of departure, the moment the sun sinks completely below the horizon. The things I learned about my life, the lives of others, and humans living with nature all added to my love, making it grow just like the sun. But the sun doesn't just set, it rises too. I am determined to return to Nicaragua and continue to learn, experience, and love every bit it has to offer. The sun may have set on our journey but it did not diminish the love and passion I found in Nicaragua. □



Eckerd students learned first hand about protected turtle nesting sites at La Flor Reserve

Deepening My Understanding of Solidarity Starts with Listening

By Tobi Alliyu, Haverford College

During a ten day educational delegation to Nicaragua, I had the opportunity to spend two nights at *Martin Centeno*—a community that emerged as a result of the relocation of its people after the Contra war. The two evenings I spent with Estella and her family were among the biggest highlights of my time in Nicaragua. This was particularly because my experience of living in the community, and the relationships I was able to develop during my stay, albeit short, prompted me to ask questions about the concept of solidarity.

Prior to the trip to Nicaragua, other members of the delegation and I were made aware of the different ways the United States and Nicaraguan history intersected, especially in terms of politics. With this knowledge in the back of my mind, I arrived at the home of my host family nervous and unsure of how I would be received. Needless to say, my concerns and worries were immediately set aside as Estella greeted us with warm welcomes and a delicious meal.

Following that, I had the opportunity to sit down with Estella, and she spoke candidly about the positive and negative aspects of life in Martin Centeno. Our discussion about effects of the war on the community made me realize that despite the fact that both countries (Nicaragua and the United States) had partaken in the war, the aftermath and

lived experiences of people from both countries were quite different.

I wondered how I could stand in solidarity with my host family. What did solidarity look like? I couldn't change history, and I didn't have the means to assist with the immediate needs of the community. After much thought however, I came to the conclusion that solidarity can begin with something as simple as listening. Even though I could not change history, I could listen, and that was a first step in building stronger bonds of solidarity. I must add that listening is very different from simply hearing. By listening, one gives the speaker a chance to tell their side of a story, their account of an event, and this acknowledgement ultimately leads to a better understanding of the situation at hand.

I believe that true understanding sets the foundation for future efforts of solidarity. That said, I am grateful to my host family and other members of the Martin Centeno community for welcoming me and other members of the delegation into their homes. I appreciated their willingness to engage in conversations that were hopefully mutually beneficial, and I have learned a lot as a result of their openness. □



Lunch with Martin Centeno Community

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Casa
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ProNica staff and volunteers at Quaker House welcome you to visit!

Quaker House

Casa Cuáquera is ProNica's guest house and home in Nicaragua.

Located in a quiet residential neighborhood, it is convenient to shopping, banks and restaurants. The Casa offers simple lodging in Managua for individuals and groups. Fully equipped kitchen or catering available.

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Join us in Nicaragua for the December 2-8, 2014 Friends Delegation

We are all inspired by the work of ProNica partner organizations. We read the newsletter, follow their stories, and visualize a better world. But why just dream? Why not experience the work yourself and meet the grassroots leaders who are transforming their society today?

Solidarity is only possible when relationships are strong. We invite you to join us in a spirit of deep listening, equality, and open-hearted sharing with our friends in Nicaragua, even where linguistic and other barriers exist. We will connect with our partners, visit their programs and experience their life-transforming work first-hand. In addition, we will have a special one day retreat with you, our partners and board members; together, we will explore continued bonds of solidarity in the struggle for a more peaceful and equitable world.

For more info: stateside@pronica.org or 727-821-2428



2013 Friends Delegation Participants at Acahualt Women's Center

"To me, Nicaragua is like a time machine. The Nicaraguans value families and neighbors. They exist in a shared sense of community and solidarity. The primary form of entertainment is conversation, and they are brilliant conversationalists. Where we struggle to be "present" and have "quality time," Nicaraguans have mastered it and do so effortlessly. It's a huge contrast from our diasporic and frenetic culture. I went to Nicaragua wanting to help and discovered that perhaps it's me that needs the help."

~ Kurt Guenther, 2013 Friends Delegation