



PRONiCA

News from Nicaragua

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Quakers in Solidarity with Nicaraguans for 29 Years

Breaking Free from Domestic Violence in Rio Blanco

By Ramón Sepúlveda, ProNica Program Director emeritus

Five hours outside of Managua and just south of the stunning Cerro Munsún Natural Reserve sits the historically troubled town of Rio Blanco.

Our partners at the *Oficina de la Mujer* (Office for Women) have their hands full. When leaders of other women's rights organizations in Nicaragua hear, "Rio Blanco," they always seem to breathe deeply before talking about what a difficult setting it is for domestic violence work. They'll typically point out that, "Our *compañeras* (companions) there are very courageous." In fact the Rio Blanco advocates have received a few death threats for their accompaniment of battered women seeking justice.

The survivors come from the city as well as surrounding rural communities. They often cross rivers, walk miles, hop on crowded busses, and carry their babies for 5 to 7 hours in order to get to the Oficina to seek assistance. If the domestic violence program in Rio Blanco was to close someday, the closest chance for these women would be Matagalpa, meaning some of them would have to travel more than a day to seek help.

The members of the Oficina staff are activists, committed to justice. So when budgetary constraints arise, they often sacrifice their own salaries first. Indeed, for the past three months, the coordinator of the program, the legal counselor, and the office watchman have all forgone salaries in order to keep providing essential services; now they're asking for our help.

Any gift you send today, large or small, will make a difference in the lives of survivors and families throughout Rio Blanco. Your investment in the livelihoods of the Oficina staff and the continuation of their work will save lives - and help build justice, peace and renewal. □



Staff members accompany a domestic violence survivor (whose image has been blurred to conceal her identity). They often bring women to the police for reporting, to the forensic clinic to be evaluated in instances of sexual abuse, and to meetings with lawyers and social workers, as appropriate. Long term empowerment includes support groups, workshops, and assistance with housing as well as income-generating projects.



"For a municipality without violence, we need everyone's participation," the banner implores the people of Rio Blanco. The domestic violence network is named after Professor Edelma Martinez, a school teacher who was killed by her husband after she reported his abuse. In addition to holistic accompaniment of domestic violence survivors, the staff and volunteers of the Oficina de la Mujer are deeply committed to spreading awareness and education about domestic violence prevention.

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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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Ada & Ramón Step Down as ProNica Co-Program Directors

By Melissa Ajabshir, ProNica Executive Director



Ramón Sepúlveda & Ada López

There is a rare quality where someone's tenderness for humanity eclipses their need for a steady foothold on life's journey. That is how Ada López and Ramón Sepúlveda have always struck me. This couple's focus on justice, peace and mercy can't easily be confined to their careers or viewed as mere pastimes; it is quite simply their daily walk through life.

As they lay down their roles as co-program directors of ProNica, I can't help but reflect on what a sincere pleasure it has been to work with both of them.

Ada's smile shimmers over her work like morning dew over a drought-resistant garden. Years of engagement with violence prevention, gender equity and conflict resolution haven't dissipated her joy. They've strengthened her resolve to impact change, and elevated her appreciation for what's right in the world, and what is possible. Ramón's analytical dexterity, gentle strength, and strategic insights are almost as impressive as his devotion to environmental justice and his propensity for building community. Together, they're quite a force for peace.

Thankfully, as they depart their current roles with ProNica to place more focus on their farm, Ramón is committed to working with ProNica as an independent contractor to further develop our delegations and other educational programs. Similarly, Ada has volunteered to continue as ProNica's legal representative, acting on our behalf with various government ministries and agencies. She is also joining the ProNica Consejo, our advisory council in Nicaragua. As we extend a big warm welcome to the new program director, Bambi Griffin, I thank Ada and Ramón, I wish them well, and I look forward to working with them in these exciting new capacities. □

Casa Materna Mary Ann Jackman Celebrates 25 Years!

By Kitty Madden, Casa Materna MAJ Volunteer Social Worker

As we at the Casa Materna MAJ celebrate 25 years of service to more than 17,500 rural mothers and newborns, we give thanks for a multitude of friends, including all of you at ProNica! Without your support, this miracle could not have happened!

When we began our service to rural mothers with high-risk pregnancies in October of 1991, we were the second Casa Materna in Nicaragua. At that time, there was a maternal death somewhere in the world every minute of every day. We called it the “silent epidemic” as the daily death rate of 1,440 mothers made no headlines, nor was it mentioned on the nightly news. In Nicaragua, the reported maternal death rate was 190 deaths/100,000 live births and in some parts of our northern mountainous region, the rate was as high as 375/100,000. Women died because they had no voice and seemed to “not count” in a country recovering from the violence of a counter-revolution.

We are happy to report that, with the help of the United Nations millennium goals and the Nicaraguan Health Ministry’s commitment to increase the number of Casa

Maternas in the country, the maternal death rate has been reduced to 50 deaths/100,000 live births, a nearly 74%

reduction. World-wide the reported reduction of maternal deaths between 2000 and 2015 was 47%. There are now more than 165 government sponsored Casas in the country though some are simply small rooms added on to rural health centers.

As the number of Casa Maternas has increased, the service at Casa

Materna MAJ has become even more focused on mothers presenting higher risks in their pregnancies. Some of these risks include: pre-eclampsia, extremely high blood pressure, previous C-section, age (mothers under 18 and over 35), along with other health conditions.

In addition, half of the work of the Casa staff is focused on outreach to midwives, adolescents, and new mothers organized into support groups in their communities. Our key goal is to reduce the number of mothers with higher-risks, thus ensuring safer birthing for all. □



Top: Mothers at 25th Anniversary Celebration
Bottom: Those who’ve served the Casa for past quarter century

Concerns about Zika Virus

At present a concern for all who are serving pregnant women in Latin America is the arrival of the Zika virus. World health organizations are particularly concerned about the possible links of the Zika virus with the increase of births of babies with microcephaly in Brazil where reported cases of Zika are now over 1.5 million. In Honduras, our neighbor to the north, there were over 11,000 cases of Zika by early March, while the number of cases in Nicaragua was still under 100. There are also investigations presently about possible links the births of babies with microcephaly to the mother’s exposure to pesticides.

Correction from Year-End Report

We regret an error in the ProNica December 2015 year-end report. Only 30 mothers chose tubal ligations at Casa Materna MAJ last year, not the 83 we reported. Additionally we referred to tubal ligations as “sterilizations,” a term CMMAJ does not use due to the negative connotations related to women in times past having been forced to have tubal ligations after giving birth. We want to make clear that the Casa Materna MAJ shares all methods of family planning, including natural family planning. Each mother there is encouraged to make her own informed decision, preferably together with her partner. Women are certainly never made to feel “forced,” and a number of women choose to declare, “I/we plan to have as many children as God sends us.”

Greetings from Bambi Griffin, ProNica's New Program Director

Every time I return to Nicaragua I learn something new. How good the morning is, the value of company over a computer, that a song is a form of art that tells a story of real people and their lives. I become more aware of life when I am in Nicaragua, in a way that I am often removed from in the United States. I'm especially reminded how precious life is, and how fragile it is.

I once shared with my brother about the folk music played in the Segovias (northern regions of Nicaragua) by roving musicians at night carrying nylon string guitars, acting as mobile jukeboxes in the coffee shops and restaurants. He immediately tried to pull up their music online, and then we proceeded to laugh about not being able to download so many of life's experiences, like the feeling of being in a restaurant with 50 people as they all join together to sing about their country's history. I hope my brother will join me here one day soon, and I look forward to meeting so many of you in Nicaragua as well.

The first time I came here was in 1999 after Hurricane Mitch. The impact on me was life altering. I went at a time in my life when high school was still a major point of reference. I had traveled to other countries, but it had been a sort of privileged backpacking. A trip to Europe taught me that working odd jobs could cover the cost of a night at a hostel, and with that, I became an international traveler, meeting people from all over the world, and looking for adventures. There was not a lot of purpose to my travels though; my goal was simply to go to as many places as possible.

Then my backpacking took me to Central America to volunteer with a nonprofit in Nicaragua called the Jubilee House Community. They were focusing on the aftermath of Hurricane Mitch which occurred a few months prior, and they were working with residents of a new community called, La Nueva Vida (The New Life). It was a camp where a large numbers of those displaced by Mitch were relocated. The people had been provided black plastic tarps and were left to construct new homes and lives.

When I arrived it was the dry season, hot and dusty. I was going to help community members by digging postholes. Wooden posts would be cemented into the holes so the black plastic tarps could be wrapped around them to create

basic shelters, the residents' new homes.

I made it a point to wear my oldest, grungiest clothes that I planned to discard when leaving Nicaragua. When we arrived, women were hanging freshly washed clothes on anything they could find: barbed wire or a tree stump, to dry them under the sun. Children were running around.

Little girls were dressed in bright frilly pageant dresses that looked out of place with the dusty brown earth and rows of black tarp tents. People were trying to put order into their day-to-day lives while living without running water, electricity, or even walls.

The community members came out to meet the volunteers, and when they did, I realized something very embarrassing, something that was the start of an important transformation for me.

The residents of Nueva Vida had done the opposite of what I had done. They had taken the time to put on the very best they had. They didn't come out to meet us looking disheveled. They were neatly dressed, their hair was combed, the lady whose house we were going to dig postholes for that morning had

applied lipstick. In contrast, I was wearing stained jeans with a hole ripped on the knee. I had on an old tee-shirt that I used to sleep in, that was also stained, and I had a bandana on my head.

Although the community members had lost almost everything they owned, in some cases even their families, they looked presentable that morning when they came to meet the volunteers. I was ashamed. I was going to meet people I had never met before to work with them on a project. Why did I think it was all right to wear clothes that I planned to throw away? Why did I present myself to them in a way that I would never present myself to any other group of people that I would be working with? Did I feel that they deserved any less than anyone else? Why had I not done for the residents of Nueva Vida what they had done for me? Put their best foot forward. They, who had so little, offered what they had, and I, who had so much didn't consider that these people deserved the basic respect I would have shown to anyone else. That day I started questioning myself, my motives, and my actions.

I realized that I unknowingly went into a community under the impression that I was going to "help." I entered their



Bambi Griffin

space with a lack of sensitivity and awareness of who they were, what they had experienced, and I focused on my needs and wants. I had not even thought about them, but rather me. I thought I was going to go do a job, to “help.” I realized that they did not need me to dig postholes for them. They were just being kind to let me do it. What they needed was to be treated with dignity, respect, and compassion. That is what they needed. I mistakenly thought I was just there to dig postholes.

I learned a lot more in that first visit to Nicaragua. I learned that things I never thought of as privileges are: privacy when you go to the bathroom, running water in the home, being alive because as a child clean water was available. I learned that regardless of a situation, no matter how tragic, people can still be kind. So many people had lost more than I could imagine, and yet they were kind to me.

I don’t often talk about my first experience in Nicaragua because I didn’t live through what the residents lived through. I did not live with a dirt floor, four posts surrounded by black plastic tarp for my walls, struggling daily for the survival of my family. I talk about it now because it was the start of my understanding of my privilege, something that I will never be able to un-do. When I think I am helping, I might actually be causing harm. That first experience was when I seriously questioned my motivations, the purpose behind my actions, and my understanding of what I was doing, and why.

After my time first time in Nicaragua, I continued to travel, but from that time forth with a purpose beyond just going places. I became focused on using my time on earth more wisely, and in authentic service to others.

I’ve been able to return to Nicaragua many times since, and every trip has been eye opening in a new way. I hope that I’ve learned to be more respectful. I hope that when I speak about the country or the people, that I am able to effectively communicate their kindness, generosity, and their struggles.

I still make mistakes. Sometimes a gesture with the arm or other non-verbal form of communication can unknowingly be offensive. Many times, I’ve had to learn to readjust my way of doing things. If the people that I am working with in a community want to sit and have coffee for an hour, I need to learn to adjust my schedule to accommodate them as best I can, because I am a guest in their country, and taking time to get to know someone is important to them. How can you trust someone who won’t even sit and have coffee with you?

Even though I have wanted to live and work in Nicaragua for a while, I have also been hesitant. I wanted to work with a specific type of organization, an organization that knows the Nicaraguan people are the experts of their communities.

I also wanted to see people from the United States have transformational experiences, like the one that made me question my way of thinking, my way of life, and the intentions behind my actions. Something that only that first-hand experience could offer me.

I was excited to see that ProNica was hiring, because the very core of the mission is respect and solidarity, and their work within Nicaragua is very much in line with my own beliefs.

When I was invited to join ProNica as the in-country program director I was thrilled, but also concerned. Concerned

because although this is what I want to do, I recognize that I am a foreigner going into Nicaragua. I don’t want anyone to think I see myself as an expert on their community. I know I am not. I know that I will make mistakes; I hope they are never hurtful like the first ones I made.

I am happy to have the opportunity to work alongside the ProNica community partners, visiting delegations, and to work as a bridge between two cultures. I am thankful to have been training with my predecessors, Ada and Ramón, and for how they have both helped prepare me for my new role. I’m excited about the ProNica mission and everything I have to learn from the people I am privileged to work with. □



Bambi (right) at Mombacho Volcano National Preserve sharing her love of Nicaragua with a friend visiting from the states

How to Tell the Story of Acahualt from the Perspective of Privilege?

By Bonnie Watkins, Twin Cities Friends Meeting

I sat, along with my husband in a small room of the Acahualt Women's Center. We had been here for nine days birding, stupefied at Nicaragua's natural beauty and well aware of our privilege to enjoy it. Today, I needed to learn a bit about the Nicaragua social justice work supported by my new friends, the Quakers. I had been an attendee at the Twin Cities (Minnesota) Friends Meeting for two years, glad for the times of silence and the caring community.

Thank goodness for AWC nurse Silvia Cisneros, who put together lots of information – good data, lists of services, and “real people” photos - in PowerPoint form so I could get the big picture quickly. And thank goodness for Ramon Sepulveda, co-director of ProNica, who kindly arranged, shepherded, and translated. The Acahualt Women's Center was built in Managua's poorest neighborhood, where hundreds of people used to live in and survive by picking through the city dump. Now there's a big recycling center, which provides jobs for about 20 percent of the people who used to live in the dump – but the other 80 percent remain desperately poor, even with some basic supports provided by the government. Nicaragua has the lowest per capita GDP of any Central American country - \$4,500 per year. And for women in this area, emotional, physical, and sexual violence are common, even more so for LGBT people and those who have been trafficked as sex slaves.

The Center began in 1992 when Silvia and a few other health promoters noticed the high incidence of cervical cancer in local women – and through rigorous research and collaboration with doctors linked it to life in the heavily polluted dump. With minimal funds, medical and social services staff began to help with prevention and detection, and soon were able to provide other life-saving services, also desperately needed: low cost medical care, legal aid, psychological therapy, sexual health education, job training, self-help groups and workshops, a community preschool and a library.

Besides this visit to the center, Ramon introduced us to Quaker House, a lovely building where 18 visitors (often a delegation there to learn and witness the work) can stay,

and a quiet outdoor patio for meetings for worship. I loved the peace pole with its traditional message in Miskito and Mayan as well as English and Spanish.

He also showed us the tiny office building housing ProNica staff – besides himself, co-director Ada Maria Lopez Rivera and bookkeeper Milton Garcia. At all three places, I was struck by the obvious commitment to “keeping it

simple.” In Minnesota, where we pride ourselves on a large “nonprofit community,” I worry sometimes that we have created maybe too much infrastructure. Nonprofit staff seem to be constantly attending webinars and conferences, often far away, with budgets for staff development and protecting boards of directors from legal action, and managers work hard to pay “competitive” salaries. In Nicaragua, ProNica has wisely helped with basic administration and fundraising for multiple groups, but relies on local grassroots efforts – like that at the women's center - to decide what needs to be done and how to do it. Both ProNica and the Acahualt Women's Center could certainly use your donation as well as mine, as funds from Europe have declined with the problems of the EU. Fewer services are offered right now, and

some women's center staff have had to cut back their hours, taking up outside jobs for family survival. I promise you that

small contributions will be used for the greater good, not for anything that might look like a “perk” to us. They give examples of \$5 for a potentially life-saving pap smear, \$75 for a tubal ligation, or \$450 for a nurse for one month.

How to tell this story, I wondered, as a privileged white person? I can say I felt that tentative heart-to-heart when Silvia trusted that we could handle photos of horrific injuries inflicted on some of the women they see, not usually included in the PowerPoint – and whose love was evident in her computer's wallpaper photo of her granddaughter, a shining face and big red hair bow that could be Nicaragua's future. I am learning from Quakers to listen with my heart as well as my head, and I am deeply grateful for all these smart hard workers who know how to lead both ways. □



Bonnie Watkins with Acahualt nurse, Silvia Cisneros

At Casa del Niño, We're Striving to Make the Arts Accessible to All

By Rosario González García, Casa del Niño Coordinator

Here in Nicaragua, art and music classes are not taught in public schools, and many children don't have access to the simplest items like crayons or paint. At the Casa del Niño Art School in the municipality of San Ramon, we feel strongly that drawing, painting, music and dance should be accessible to every child.

Demand for our courses has been consistently high, and yet many youth who are passionate about the arts have not been able to participate. With the prevalence of poverty in this area, even heavily subsidized art classes can be out of reach for many.

We make every effort for the classes to be as affordable as possible. For example, a beginning art class for sixty students held twice per week for ten months costs a total of \$1,857 USD for the entire ten months. That covers all supplies, operational costs and the teacher's salary! Still \$40 for one child to attend art class, even for ten months, is prohibitive for many families out here in the countryside.

We also offer a three-year teaching program in Fine Arts. It runs every Saturday from

8AM-4PM, making it accessible for those who work. This three-year program only costs participants \$11 per month, plus a \$4 registration fee.

For just \$136, one deserving student can be awarded a full one-year scholarship to attend the program.

We also offer a 10-month music class with guitar, bass and flute. The cost for attendance in the ten-month program is \$11 per month plus a \$4 registration fee. For \$114 a child can attend ten months of music instruction and appreciation.

Finally we are offering a course in dance that is also ten months and is offered on Fridays and Saturdays. This class has a \$2 registration fee, and only costs \$4 monthly, for a total cost of \$42 to attend the 10-month dance program.

Many families in Nicaragua appreciate the arts. It plays such a vital role in our heritage, but the costs associated often make classes like these out of reach.

If you find it in your heart to make a gift, it will help us make these classes accessible to all who are interested in the arts, regardless of income level. ☐



Casa del Niño Art School

Top: Dance class
Middle: Visual arts class
Bottom: Music class

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