



# PRONiCA

## News from Nicaragua

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*Quakers in Solidarity with Nicaraguans for 29 Years*

### Gender Equality in the Martin Centeno Community has far Reaching Impact

By Melissa Ajabshir, Executive Director

With a gentle smile, her eyes met those of the adults around her. She was only about 16 years old, but joining the meeting with two ProNica directors and the rest of the Martin Centeno leadership team, this young woman held her own as a representative of the youth committee.



Members of the Martin Centeno Youth Committee

Her confidence was welcome and yet felt somehow out of place. In my travels around Nicaragua, young females who had grown up in the countryside often seemed relegated to near invisibility. With many nations that go through gender equality advancements, as Nicaragua did during its 1980s revolution, women's rights principles may only reach peasant farming communities as abstractions, if at all.

But the Martin Centeno Community was rebuilt in large part by women when many of the men were called into combat. During the contra war, the original 16 families of the community fled their old village when fighting there took the lives of 2 brothers, including 18-year-old Martin Centeno.

As internal refugees relocated to a cow pasture only accessible across a temperamental river, they quickly set out to rebuild. In teams of 12 they constructed each family's simple new shelter, the women sawing boards and pounding nails alongside the men.

The strength that the women had always had was evident, and soon they rose to positions of influence within the tiny village. To this day, women there hold key leadership roles. And the community of now 70

families holds as a core value that all people deserve equal economic, political and social rights, whether male or female, young or old. They feel strongly that when every member is empowered, the whole community is empowered.

Their principle of equality seems to know no bounds. Each year when the Martin Centeno Community requests funding from ProNica, they identify the two most dilapidated homes in their village and ask for enough money for replacement or repair, strengthening the "least of these" to strengthen the whole. Beyond these minor requests, they primarily seek financial support for the Women's Agricultural Cooperative and the Domestic Violence Network (Oficina de la Mujer), based in the nearby city of Rio Blanco and serving the whole municipality. Together with your support, they work to pay forward their community's success by helping countless women in the region gain food security and freedom from domestic violence.

No wonder the 16-year-old youth leader carried herself with such strength. She's got exceptional role models, and she has all of you who believe in what her community stands for and what they're working so hard to accomplish. □

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### Other Contributors:

Bette Hoover	Andrea Robinson
Skylar McClane	Rosario González García

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

**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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## Doña Panchita's Kindness

By Bambi Griffin, ProNica Program Director



Bambi Griffin program director, Panchita Fletes housekeeper at Quaker House since 1991, and Marjorie Guitierrez new program assistant

Ahhhhh.....finally air-conditioning. I'd been working in Managua for less than a week in that oppressive heat that's hard to put into words. I am not one of the many people who works outdoors, and office work cannot be compared to manual labor, but after working for three days in a cement wall office in 90-degree heat I was thankful for a working air conditioner! I enjoyed chilly air blowing across my face for a moment before I sat back down to work.

An hour later the office felt better. It wasn't cold or really even comfortable, but at least sweat was no longer rolling down my back. Heading out, I opened the door to the back patio, and to my surprise there was Doña Panchita, ProNica's beloved housekeeper of 25 years. The hot air from the AC unit was blowing onto the patio directly on her! I felt horrible. Here I was just getting comfortable, and it was having a direct negative effect on Doña Panchita.

In just those few seconds I drew so many parallels about how seemingly harmless actions can negatively impact others. It was a brief moment in my life, but I'll never forget seeing the hot air blowing on her while I had been inside taking a break from the heat. It was a good reminder that sometimes we need to take extra care to make sure that our actions are not inadvertently harming others.

I immediately turned off the air, and Doña Panchita smiled at me saying that she wanted me to turn it back on since it was so hot. Of course I didn't, but having just moved back to Nicaragua for this role with ProNica, her act of kindness meant so much to me.

I've learned a lot in a short time from Doña Panchita, and she has made me feel so welcome. I'll continue to turn the air conditioner off when she is working on the patio, and I suspect that she will continue to ask me to leave it on. □



# A Journey of Healing and Renewal with ProNica Project Partners

By Bette Hoover, Baltimore Yearly Meeting & Just Peace Circles, Inc.

Warm breezes welcomed our team of six healers to Managua on Feb 18, 2016. The group settled in at Quaker House where we were greeted with a delicious meal and hugs from ProNica staff. The team included massage therapists, yoga teachers, a psychologist and a sex therapist. For several team members it was their first visit to Nicaragua. Our mission was to lead workshops and retreats on trauma healing for ProNica staff and partners in various parts of the country.

The first day the team visited sites in the city of Managua and listened intently to the history of the country. It was important to understand the context of the country and the inter-connectedness of our nations. The tree-lined Salvador Allende Bolivar brought us to present times as we admired the “trees of life” that were created by first lady, Dona Rosario Ortega. The well-lit metal structures loom tall and powerful on the avenue and around the city. Political billboards proclaiming the strength and goodness of the Ortega government are everywhere. A tourist might surmise there were no other political parties in Nicaragua.

Our first workshop was a one-day AVP (Alternatives to Violence Project) training on trauma healing held at the Kairos Center.

ProNica partner, Harold Urbina, and other AVP facilitators from around the country enjoyed the intense “advanced” workshop experience. For most of our team, it was an introduction to AVP and the popular education modality.

Next we traveled to the Centro de Retiros

La Palmera in Diriamba to spend the next few days with Los Quinchos staff. Initially, we visited the children and were entertained by a visiting circus working with the former street children for a month. Our team was excited by the holistic approach of Los Quinchos to the traumatized street children. We observed them learning new skills (like sewing or drumming), cooking together and a cooperative family approach.

“The best part of the experience for me was working with Los Quinchos staff. It was amazing to see their resilience,

desire to learn and help in spite of all they had been through themselves. “Sometimes I feel jaded about the world, and working with them boosted my sense of hope.” This statement is from Melanie Ricaurte, one of the team members. Her reflection was shared after several days in retreat with the amazingly resilient and resourceful staff of Los Quinchos.

Our third - and final- retreat was held in San Ramon at the Sueno de la Campana Retreat Center. Retreatants came from ProNica’s northern partners, and some traveled for many hours by bus to join us. Casa del Nino, Casa Materna, Rio Blanco Women’s Network were all well represented at the retreat.

Each person was scheduled to receive a massage and got called from the circle when their turn came. Again we explored types of trauma with a popular education format. We spoke of stages of grief and how to deal with them. There was ample time to share stories and learn some new information as well. For many the five circles of sexuality were a welcome way to explore issues of relationship and violence. The circles include: sexualization, sensuality, intimacy, sexual identity and sexual health and reproduction.



The team of healers gathers and centers before facilitating a trauma healing retreat

In addition to leading the three retreats, the team had time to swim at Laguna de Apoyo, stroll along the lakeshore waterfront park in Managua, and have a mini-retreat at La Garnacha near Esteli.

The healers were all pleased to participate in this project. They

were deeply moved by their interactions with ProNica partners who are so deeply committed to the work of social change. Several described a deep healing that happened to them during the experience as well.

Understanding the historical and political context was crucial for the healers in addressing the origins of trauma in the country. We hope and trust that our healing work with ProNica partners affected them as much as it did us. Just Peace Circles, Inc plans to return with another team of healers in February of 2017, as way opens. □



# Moorestown Friends School Students and Casa del Niño Art School Students share Cross-Cultural Exchange through Labor and Music

By Andrea Robinson, Moorestown Friends School science teacher



Last week I was sitting in a meeting with Bishop Stokes of the Episcopal Diocese of New Jersey. We were discussing how to grow our small church congregation. The Bishop suggested that we go into the community and fulfill a need. One older church member suggested that we had already met with an after school program director and told them how to raise money, and she didn't take our advice so we were feeling discouraged. Canon Phyllis Jones who was accompanying the Bishop then said, "Did you ask them if that was what they needed?"

I nodded with understanding because my recent experience with ProNica in Nicaragua had helped me to understand the concept of solidarity.

However, other church members continued to argue and struggle with this idea of asking what people need instead of assuming we know what they need. The concept of solidarity is both universal and universally hard to grasp.

One of the greatest challenges I faced while traveling with fifteen high school students in Nicaragua was helping them to understand the concept of international service learning as an alternative to international service work. They wanted to "do" something and give of themselves in a tangible way. The idea that our labor was anything more than cursory became abundantly clear when we were slowly chipping away at a stump of a tree and taking numerous water and rest breaks, while our bus driver Manuel, who was under no obligation to help at all, took a few swings at the stump and it was gone. It became apparent that there were plenty of men in San Ramon who could have levelled the ground for an outdoor music pavilion for Casa del Niño in an afternoon, and it took us three days. They didn't "need" our help, but by levelling the ground for the music pavilion we were given the opportunity to have a relationship exchange with the students who were taking music lessons at Casa del Niño and the staff.



Ultimately it was our shared Quaker traditions that helped us to connect with ProNica's community partners. Our students sang "We are marching in the light of God" to reciprocate the musical performance by the

students at Casa del Niño. And if we truly espouse the Quaker values taught at Moorestown Friends School, seeing the light of God in everyone should be the most compelling reason for engaging in solidarity work rather than service work. Solidarity levels the playing field, a concept that is so important for privileged North America youth to begin understanding now. □





# A Moment at Los Quinchos Sparks a new Sense of Global Interconnectedness for one Moorestown Friends School Student

By Skylar McClane, Moorestown Friends School student

One particular moment in Nicaragua that stood out to me was visiting Los Quinchos—the home for street kids. We arrived and sat through an extensive overview of the program. It was created by an Italian woman who wanted to help the kids on the streets start over.

After listening to the presentation, we walked outside where we met some of the kids. A young boy came and gave everyone a hug. I hugged him back, knowing how much he needed extra love. He grabbed my hand and led me over to the place where other kids were making hammocks. He took the tool that held the yarn and tried to teach me how to weave the yarn to create the hammock. I was horrible at it. However, he was patient and helped me to keep trying. Soon, I got the hang of it, though what I was doing wasn't nearly as good as his work. We ran out of string, and with that we went inside.

The language barrier made it hard to communicate with him. However, using the Spanish I knew I asked him his name and age. He was 10 years old, and his name was Jimmy. I asked him about school, and he said he really liked math. His favorite sport was soccer, and he liked to play it with his friends.

One of my friends, Hannah, came to join Jimmy and me. Jimmy saw the bracelets on her wrist and pointed to them. Hannah decided to give one to him, and he was overjoyed. I could tell that this small act of kindness meant so much to him, and that he probably would take care of the bracelet for a long time. After putting the bracelet on his wrist, he pointed to the rest of Hannah's bracelets again, and we

asked if he wanted another one. He then pointed to me, and asked Hannah to give one to me. Hannah gave me one, and once again, Jimmy smiled. It was moments like these that made me realize how fortunate we truly are, and how far a small act of kindness can go.

Jimmy picked up a rusty unicycle off of the floor and started riding it. Hannah and I started clapping, and cheering him on. When he asked if we wanted a turn, we politely declined. In a dress, I did not think riding a unicycle would go well. He then went over to a crate filled with Chinese yo-yos and picked one up. He began spinning the yarn and throwing the yo-yo in the air. He did amazing tricks that I don't think I would be able to master. He went through his legs, over his head, and spun around. When he asked me to try it, all I could manage was accidentally throwing the yo-yo to the ground. He kept laughing at me, and I was laughing with him. We were having a great time.

I really shined once he gave me a hula hoop. Finally there was something I was actually good at! He was impressed. He picked up another hula hoop and together we hula hooped while other children watched. In this moment, I realized how similar we really are. Though we have

different circumstances, and ways of living, we both had a basic enjoyment of life. We shared the same emotions, as we laughed together and had a great time.

A bad start doesn't mean a bad ending. Jimmy was proof to me that no matter what your circumstances might be, there is always hope for the future. □



Moorestown Friends School students traveled to Nicaragua from their New Jersey school that is 20 minutes outside of Center City Philadelphia and was founded as a one-room school house by three Quaker families in 1758

# 150 Students Celebrate International Book Day at the Estelí Library

By Bambi Griffin, ProNica Program Director

Many people would not think twice about a public library, but in Nicaragua a public library can be a revolutionary concept. Most schools here don't have books. Even students at the university level rely on photocopies to make education affordable. Owning a book is a sign of wealth, and most Nicaraguan families will never have one in their homes, not because they don't enjoy reading but because they cannot afford that luxury.

In Nicaragua the basics of education are all that schools are able to provide. Typically a classroom has chairs and a chalkboard. Often sharing desks, a large number of kids will pile into a small room and take notes in their notebooks from one teacher. School is only half a day in Nicaragua, and part of the reason is that they don't have gym, music, or art classes. Schools don't have libraries where children study or borrow books, nor do they have places to sit and work on homework quietly.

The Estelí Library, located in a the northern mountainous part of Nicaragua, is a rich resource available to all members of the community. Unfortunately because it is such an unfamiliar concept, many people don't know that they can walk into the library and use its resources. That's been changing though thanks to significant community outreach by the Estelí Library.

The library is a beautiful space where youth and adults alike can find quiet places to study and read. The book collection may be tiny in comparison to libraries in North America, but it is a treasure of Nicaraguan authors, books in Spanish, and children's literature. No matter what someone's income, they can borrow reading materials to have in their homes, a radical idea in some parts of the developing world.

The library staff are lovers of Nicaraguan poetry, art, and literature. They share these passions with youth through a school outreach initiative that brings books into the classrooms, also allowing the staff to promote the many

benefits of going to the library. This outreach extends beyond the classroom. They work with other community organizations to enrich and educate the public. An example is their mini library at the Casa Materna in Estelí. A selection of books on topics such as women's health, baby's health, reproduction, and recreational reading are available for the expectant mothers.

In addition to outreach activities, the library holds social events to celebrate literature. Saturday April 23rd was *Día International de Libro* (International Book Day). The library held special activities for community youth all

weekend. Teachers were invited to bring classes to participate. On the inside of the library, paintings by local artists filled the walls, and art projects created by youth hung from the ceiling. Books were strategically laid out on tables to grab young readers' attention. A variety of activities were held throughout the library: poetry readings, discussions, and book readings.

Once opened, the library filled with children ranging in age from 8-16. Some worked on group projects for school. Others joined in programs or listened attentively to poetry and discussions. Many were drawn to arts and crafts projects, while others just picked up books and started reading. Their faces would light up when they walked into the building. Some had visited before, and many others were visiting for the first time.



13-year-old Elizabeth checks out *Mundo Antiguo* (Ancient World) during the International Book Day celebration at the Estelí Library

In total approximately 150 students visited the library to celebrate International Book Day, not including the adults and other youth who came in not because of the event, but just to use the resources that the library offers.

The Estelí Library is an incredibly valuable resource for members of the department of Estelí, and together with your friendship and support, they are working hard to insure that all people, regardless of their income have fair and equal access to things that are luxury items here in Nicaragua, books. □



## A Fond Farewell to Milton García

By Melissa Ajabshir, ProNica Executive Director



Three years ago, Milton García joined ProNica as our program assistant in Nicaragua. As a highly respected youth organizer in his home town just outside of Managua, with an accounting degree and experience with another international nonprofit, we felt confident he would be a great fit. We knew then about his dedication to social causes

and his technical knowledge, but over time we were blessed to also come to know his infectious optimism, clever sense of humor, and his unwavering professionalism.

Just after leaving ProNica, Milton sent us this note: "I appreciate all the work that ProNica does. Since I started my work with ProNica I've learned a lot. I've seen sincerity, hospitality, camaraderie, simplicity, love and so many other things. Being part of ProNica let me know such beautiful people. One of the things that I'll always take from this is so many stories. Every opportunity I've had to talk to the people from the different project partners, I've learned from all of their stories. I learned how hard the life can be, but still that hardness is not enough to beat the hearts and the spirit of the people. Even in bad times, there's no reason to not laugh or have fun. Sharing stories with people feeds the hearts of everyone."

We wish him blessings with his new life in San Marcos! ☐

## Welcome Marjourie Gutiérrez

By Marjourie Gutierrez, ProNica Program Assistant



My name is Marjourie Gutierrez. I'm a 23 years old Nicaraguan, and I live in Managua. I have a degree in public accounting and auditing from the Universidad del Valle, and I've worked with various private companies as an assistant accountant and an administrative assistant.

I wanted to work for ProNica because they help Nicaraguans improve our country and the future for our children. I feel very happy to be a part of this beautiful work and to put my time toward serving and working with others. I look forward to learning a lot about the ProNica project partners because often we can be oblivious to the needs of others, including our country's children and what they need to succeed.

On my visit to the ProNica project partner Los Quinchos I met the director, Zelinda, who is a very friendly person. She shared about the project and how they help children. Then I had the opportunity to interact with several girls called the Yahoskas. I noticed an 8-year-old girl, so very young, and at an age where children need so much love and understanding. I could see on all of the girls' faces that despite the harsh circumstances that brought them to this residential home, they now smiled and offered hugs. It was truly a heart warming experience to meet and spend time with the Yahoskas, and I hope to visit them again soon. ☐

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## Inside this Issue:

- Bidding farewell to Milton Garcia
- Return of healers to work with project partners
- First time delegation from Moorestown Friends School
- Celebration of International Book Day

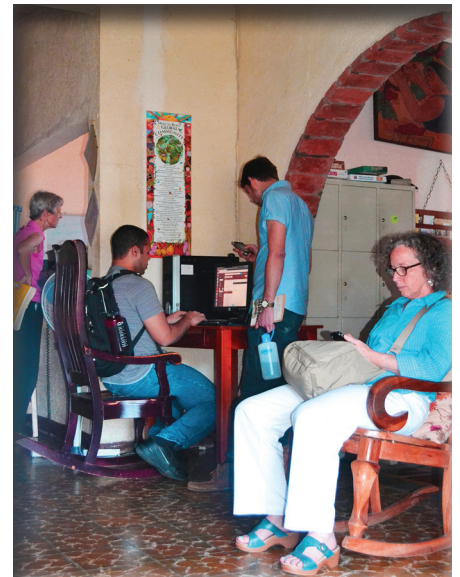
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