



# PRONiCA

## News from Nicaragua

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*Quakers in Solidarity with Nicaraguans for 29 Years*

### Transformative Moment

By Maggie Kurnyta, student, The College of New Jersey

I have always been a watcher, a silent observer who studies people and places. However, when I took part in The College of New Jersey delegation in June, I knew being silent would not suffice. To simply observe the thought-provoking presentations and insightful conversations would have done a disservice to my cultural immersion and my own self-evolution.

I was surrounded by a sea of activists who were certainly vocal about their experiences and their work. So, I decided to engage in any form whether it was vocally or just mentally, with any and all speakers. Reflecting back on that decision, it was singlehandedly the most important one I have ever made in my life.

Violence against women has never been solely a women's issue for me; it has always been and will always remain personal. As I listened to Ms. Karla Rojas speak about her commitment to end domestic violence and sexual assault, I tried to place myself in her position. Karla witnessed domestic violence firsthand and decided that she could no longer tolerate it in the world. Many people make the same commitment with tired eyes and heavy hearts, but Karla was different. She acted quickly, becoming a police officer and patrolling neighborhoods that were rampant with abuse and toxic environments. As I observed her presentation filled with shocking statistics, I knew the passion I witnessed in her eyes was the same one I felt in my mind and in my heart. She was the activist that I knew I had to imitate.

It may have been the intimate atmosphere or the delicious dragon fruit juice I was drinking, but I finally decided to do something: I asked a question. Before I knew it, that question veered into a personal story shared by Ms. Rojas, and suddenly we were all

having a genuine conversation. To me, that moment was my true cultural immersion with the exchange of languages and knowledge. Instead of just digesting information and statistics, we had an opportunity to understand and communicate our thoughts and passions as students, feminists, and activists. I no longer felt afraid to speak up about injustices or the roots of social, political, and cultural issues.

If I had stayed in my comfort zone, I would never have had that memorable experience, and I would only be half the activist I am today. It is so much easier to be an observer; I can certainly attest to that. Moving outside of your comfort bubble can involve a push, and for me, that push was my week-long trip to Nicaragua through ProNica. After preparing for more than a year, I was still moved by what I saw, how I felt, and what I learned; no amount of preparation will ever be enough to experience the world.

During my stay in Quaker House, I often passed by a poster of Martin Niemöller's poem "First They Came For the Socialists..." Reflecting back on it now, I cannot help but smile. Your voice is a tool that when channeled correctly, can change the world. Without ProNica and the Nicaragua Solidarity Project, I would never have truly found my voice. □



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### ProNica Board

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**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.

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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## Farewell from our Executive Director

By Melissa Ajabshir



Reading Sister Mary Margaret's cursive note on pale blue stationery reminded me of the unshakable bonds between the project partners in Nicaragua and all of you.

In her letter I learned that Sister Mary Margaret volunteered with the Acahualinca

Women's Center from 1987 to 1992 and that she worked alongside founder Maria Elena Bonilla to establish the community library there. I also discovered that years later in 2015 she fielded questions from curious and thoughtful middle schoolers after recounting stories of her peace work in Nicaragua with them—and that the exchange sparked a car wash that raised over \$1,200.

Notes like hers are always inspiring and thankfully not uncommon. They're among my very favorite parts of the work here in the stateside office—your letters—about life changing visits to Nicaragua, special memories with project partners, stories from Quaker House, or your resonance with grassroots efforts. Your notes are varied, but they never fail to ground me in the mission all over again. And they assure me that while the ProNica family may be spread across 30 states and 5 countries, no geographical distance can diminish our strength or unique affinity.

It's this ProNica family that is very much on my heart as I lay down my role as stateside director. I feel profound appreciation as I prepare to depart this October for exciting new life endeavors. I extend gratitude to the staff, past and present, some of the most dedicated peace activists one could ever know. I thank Davida Johns for her mentorship. I send an enormous shout-out to the project partners for demonstrating that community-generated solutions are the most effective, lasting and dignified forms of global development, bar none. I extend gratitude to our advisory boards in the US and Nicaragua for guidance that is spiritual, practical, and indispensable. And to each and every one of you, please accept my sincere admiration for your remarkable bridge of friendship with Nicaragua.

The ProNica Board is nearing its selection of my successor. Whoever he or she is will have my full support in the transition and beyond. I can't wait to meet that person and watch the ProNica family continue its good work in Nicaragua and its fine journey toward shared humanity. □

# Maternal Age as High-risk Factor in Rural Nicaragua

By Kitty Madden, volunteer social worker, Casa Materna MAJ

When Maria Fatima arrived at the Casa Materna in mid-July, she looked around thoughtfully taking in every aspect of her surroundings. Then she said, “I was here almost ten years ago, and I am remembering how it was. I was only 14 years old and about to give birth to my son. It was October, and I named my son for the famous Nicaraguan boxer Alexis Arguello. I hope that Alexis can come and visit me before his sister is born.”

Gradually, Maria Fatima shared her life story. “I was just 8 years old when my mother gave birth to my younger sister. I had 2 older sisters and a brother. Then, when the baby was only 3 months old, my mother became very ill and died suddenly. For all of us, including my father, there was so much sadness.”

Maria Fatima’s story of her teen pregnancy is not that different from others who have come to the Casa Materna from their rural homes to give birth in the Matagalpa Regional Hospital. First births in Nicaragua are considered high risk by the Ministry of Health (MINSa) but especially so for teen mothers who account for 1 in 4 births. One risk factor in our rural region is the distance from the hospital but another has to do with the stature and development of a young mother.

Had Maria’s mother been there to accompany her, might it have been possible that she would have attended school and not been seduced into becoming pregnant with her boyfriend who was 4 years older? As it turned out, the father of Alexis was alcoholic and actually died from his disease in his early twenties when his son was just 3 years old.

Four years ago when his mother met and married his stepfather, Luis Enrique, Alexis knew the joy of having a father. When Alexis and Luis came to visit, it was evident how much his adoptive father cared for his son, and Maria proudly told us what a wonderful artist he is. It was with joy that the family of three awaited the planned birth of Alexis’ sister.

From our first year in 1991, the risk factor of age, either older or younger, was very evident. Twenty-five percent were mothers over 35, many of whom were about to give birth to their 10th, 12th or even 15th child. Our oldest mother was 50 and about to have her 19th.

At the same time, mirroring the statistics in all of Nicaragua, some 25% of our mothers each year were under age 20. Most often the pregnancy, even when not planned was “wanted” (i.e. the young mother was “accompanied” by the father even if not formally married, and the father was committed to caring for his family). At other times there have, sadly, been instances of rape or incest.

As many girl children in rural communities do not have access to education beyond the 6th grade, and many don’t even make it that far, the idea of bearing a child at 16 or 17 (and even 15) years of age is not out of the norm. Many Casa mothers still tell us, “My mother gave birth to me

when she was just 15 or 16.” And some will share solemnly, “My mother (or grandmother) died in childbirth.” It is not unusual to hear from a 23 year old mother returning to the Casa: “I was here to give birth to my first child when I was just 15 and now,” she adds with pride, “My husband and I are having our second child, a child we have planned for.”



As MINSa takes on the mission of creating more Casa Maternas (now over 170 while Casa Materna MAJ was the 2nd), our staff continues to develop educational programs and strategies focused on reducing teen pregnancies in our mountainous region. Our Follow-up Program attending 400+ former Casa mothers in 12 communities is supplemented by the Outreach to Adolescents program funded by friends from Switzerland.

As we approach the 25th anniversary of the Casa Materna MAJ in late October, we celebrate the more than 17,650 mothers and newborns. And we give thanks for international solidarity, including the faithful support of ProNica friends that continues to make possible this vital service for rural mothers. □



# Los Quinchos 26th Anniversary Celebration

By Bambi Griffin, program director, ProNica

On June 18th in the small mountain community of San Marcos, Nicaragua, Los Quinchos held its 26th Anniversary celebration. It started at 9AM with visitors arriving to *La Finca* (The Farm), which was the very first Quinchos home. La Finca is always a lively place with classes in woodworking, hammock making and repair, where children up to the age of 13 live and care for livestock and chickens. Today had a different feel though. Brightly colored streamers lined the long dirt driveway. Children came pouring out to meet the guests and provide personal tours. The atmosphere was like Christmas morning.



Children proudly showed what they had done to bring the celebration together, from hanging streamers, blowing up balloons, to helping clean and organize various areas. If a guest looked unattended to, it didn't take long for a Quincho to run up, grab their hand, and show off what they had done to help in the preparation for the festivities. The delight that the children took in their work preparing for the day was evident and touching.

The celebration was held for Los Quinchos, the organization, but the day was really for the children. It was packed with sports, games, and a pool party. Seeing children acting like kids and knowing that this program has given them their basic childhood rights was heartwarming. The second part of the day was just as festive with clowns, artistic and cultural performances, and closing with a dance party and live music. As impressive and beloved as the Los

Quinchos program is, it was seeing the children that made the day special. Children deserve a home, food, education, and affection from caring adults who want to see them thrive. The children of Los Quinchos have managed to survive poverty, violence, and abuse. This unique program understands and respects that children who are living on the streets are still children, but they have faced decisions and choices that many adults rarely imagine.

Los Quinchos offers children a chance to leave the streets, but rather than forcing them, the staff recognizes that the success of the program relies on the children entering willingly. The children must make the decision to leave the streets and join the program, and this choice empowers them. It gives them a chance to make a decision for

their own lives, something that they may have never done. Moving their lives in a positive direction is in their own hands, and owning that decision leads to long-term success.

No longer living on the streets, where many were forced to beg, steal, and were exposed to violence, they are now enrolled in public schools, receiving daily meals, and have a loving and supporting community that understands their unique needs and stands behind them to claim their rights to live peaceful lives free from violence.

The celebration was about each one of them—and their recovery and growth. Los Quinchos' twenty-six years of working with children and empowering them to move forward in their lives is a beautiful reason to celebrate. Happy 26th anniversary, Los Quinchos! □



## Grieving the Loss of Dear Friend to Los Quinchos, Francesco Montis

Former ProNica Nicaragua Coordinator Lillian Hall recalled, "He was a huge pillar of support of every kind for Los Quinchos as an organization and for Zelinda (Los Quinchos founder) personally. As the president and founder of the Quinchos association in Cagliari, Sardinia, Italy, he dedicated his time to collecting funds for Los Quinchos and publishing photos of the kids. Almost every photo you see of a Quincho was taken by Franco... His life was Los Quinchos. It will be a huge loss for them."

# Gaining *la Confianza* (the Confidence) at Los Quinchos

By Maria Padron, summer intern, Haverford College

When I first heard that I would be working at Los Quinchos, a residential center for youth located in San Marcos, Nicaragua, I was excited and nervous. I had worked with youth in similar situations in Immokalee, Florida and was happy to spend my summer with middle to high school aged kids again. As I started to picture how my summer would pan out, I began to plan possible projects. I wanted to start a garden which the kids would tend to and be responsible for, in order to teach them how to cultivate food as well as give them a chance to be proud of the fruits (or vegetables) of their labor and allow them to gain confidence as the garden grew.

Once I arrived at Los Quinchos, I was elated to find out that there was a plot of land I could use. However, I quickly realized that before I could launch head first into the project I would have to gain “*la confianza*” of the staff and kids there. “*La confianza*” in Spanish translates into “the confidence,” a phrase which means essentially the trust, confidence and respect that someone has for you.

As I set out to gain this confidence through English classes, math and reading reinforcement, taking the kids to Catholic mass, playing soccer games, accompanying them to their extracurricular activities, helping them with chores and just generally having a steady presence, I began to see different trends in the kids. Many of them had little confidence in their academic abilities and would become frustrated, unmotivated and angry while working, or outright avoided doing homework, or even going to school. They also showed insecurities in things such as skin color, the way they talked, or how they were perceived by school kids (many of their peers thought of the Quincho kids as “street kids from Managua” and associated them with the negative connotations, such as a history of drug/physical/sexual abuse, violence, poverty and thievery).

As I grew closer to these kids, it broke my heart to learn of the insecurities they carried and how they were stigmatized in their schools. In lieu of time and new ideas, I abandoned my garden project for something that fit the kids in their present situations. I planned discussion workshops on things such as stress and culture as well as identity, in efforts to bridge the problems the pre-teens and teenagers faced. Additionally, I started to emphasize positive

reinforcement and one-on-one attention in my English classes.

My fellow volunteer Sara and I also held sessions in which we would play music while coloring or making bracelets with the children. These sessions served to promote stress relief and relaxation. They provided motivation for attending school and completing homework or chores as well as encouraging good behavior, all prerequisites for attending the sessions. We could see pride and confidence as the children proudly displayed their artwork.

Throughout my weeks here I have learned that you don’t have to make a change or have a big project to make a difference. Simply being present, positive and supportive made an amazing difference to the kids. Through the



workshops, positive reinforcement during their studies, and support/pride in their work with academics, bracelets and their activities, the youth at the center blossomed. Kids who would normally run and hide from academic reinforcement would ask for more math problems or proudly come with book in hand, ready to read out loud for a while. Boys who would be rowdy, angry and stressed from the day’s activities turned into quiet creators as they brought their coloring book pages to life. Teens who complained of insecurity about their looks, abilities and background began to see themselves as individuals who were confident, intelligent, capable and not bound to their past, able to go forth and do great things.

As I come to the close of my time here in Nicaragua, I leave knowing that I will come back to see the kids I’ve learned to love, hoping that just the little things, such as being present, has made a difference. □



# Moorestown Friends School Student Explores Solidarity Through Service

By Kirstin McKeown, high school student, Moorestown Friends School



we were doing. It was not just about getting the job done but about really appreciating the impact.

The sense of urgency that I had previously associated with service work turned into a desire to understand the community I was in and what effect we were having on it. Yes, we built for those students and faculty the foundation of a school, a physical product of our work. But more than that, we gave them an opportunity. That building was an embodiment of the passion, dedication, and love those students shared for music. We were able to see our results not through the cement fillings in the ground, but through the sounds of the music they were playing and the smiles on their faces. We were giving them an opportunity to do what they love, and they were extremely grateful for that. We left the school with a sense of accomplishment, not just in the materialized evidence of our work, but also in helping someone do something they love. Hearing those children sing and play their instruments solidified the fact that passion is just as important as knowledge.

When I signed up for the trip to Nicaragua as a high school student at Moorestown Friends School, I knew little about the country or ProNica. Through prerequisite meetings, the goal of ProNica was made clear: we were going to Nicaragua to learn about the culture and embark on a service learning journey.

The term service learning seemed vague to me. Upon arriving in Nicaragua, it became evident we were there not only to help, but to be helped. We visited different people and businesses and learned about their struggles and goals. We were in such a destitute country but felt an overwhelming sense of positivity. People there were so optimistic and hopeful, and talked about what they did have, not what they didn't. It was inspiring, to say the least.

I knew we were helping them, not only by buying their products, but by giving them attention to let them know that their work was appreciated. However, I left each and every place and person feeling like they helped me as well. I learned that no matter how tough a situation can be, looking at it positively is always an option.

We also helped build a school for art and music. Sure, we were able to see our progress through each tree we knocked down and each post we painted, but the real reward came not from the physical results of our actions, but from the kindness we received from the students and staff. As we worked, I felt a sense of appreciation for the type of service

I learned through this trip that just because someone is less fortunate than you does not mean they have less than you do. I discovered that there is always something to learn. I arrived in Nicaragua feeling as though I was going to help people and make their situation better, but I left feeling as though they helped me. We gave them opportunity, but they gave us an appreciation for the little things in life. It was a two-way street, a mutual benefit: solidarity. □



# Volunteer Health Promoters Foster Holistic Care in their Communities

By Nahara L. Saballos, long-term volunteer, Haverford College

Over the past year, I worked alongside ProNica, volunteering for *Fundacion Somos Asi Por La Paz Y La Vida* (We are Here for Peace and Life), a holistic health organization created to train health promoters in basic skills to save lives in their rural communities. As a long-term volunteer, I partook in projects ranging from training health promoters, supporting administrative roles, and assisting in the accompaniment of victims of violence. Now that I have left Nicaragua and have had a month to reflect on all of the exhilarating and educational experiences, I realize the essence of my volunteer work was that of a support person, enabling health promoters to give their all to their jobs.

Working directly with health promoters was a humbling experience. All sixty of the promoters with FUNSAPV are dedicated people who chose to give their valuable time to be trained so they could impart health talks. By bringing knowledge into their communities, promoters reduce high-risk pregnancies, domestic violence, and STDs. In addition, health promoters confront common health concerns such as their community's access to potable water, clean homes, and nutrition. In remote communities, where the nearest health post could be a two hour walk away, the work health promoters do is invaluable.

Health promoters, however, do not receive any compensation for their time. Many of the promoters I worked with struggled to provide for their own families and often relied on seasonal farming as their main source of income. Despite this challenge, all of the promoters I

met were deeply committed to the cause. During my time in Nicaragua, I met promoters such as Jose Antonio, who started working as a young adult during the Contra War, carrying coolers full of vaccines into the mountains. I met women like Doña Anastazia, who albeit a tiny, delicate woman, had twenty years of experience as a midwife. Lastly, there is the next generation health promoters like Jarvin, a seventeen year old splitting his time between school, trainings, and agricultural work.

The people who are truly changing Nicaragua are the health promoters. They hold the knowledge of what is needed most in their communities and are taking matters into their own hands to create change. It is humbling to see such commitment, sacrifice, and passion for the wellbeing of their families and friends. These characteristics highlight for me the essence of Nicaragua, a country that has overcome and continues to overcome challenges. □



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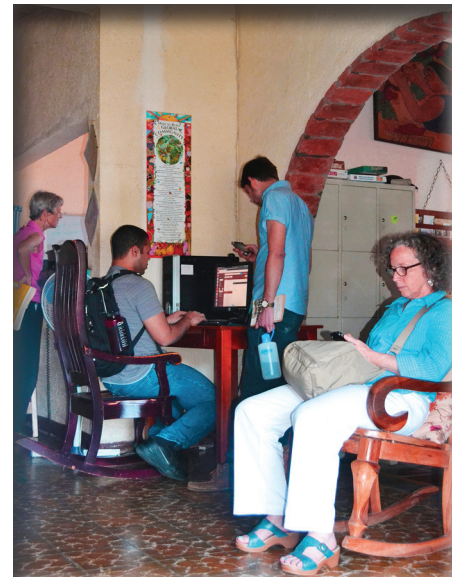
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