

August-September-October 2008 Report

Well, it's been a very rainy last few months. A handful of tropical storms have come close by causing, at times, days and days of straight rain. The streets are full of potholes (even more than usual!) and the dirt roads (like to El Porvenir) are in terrible, terrible shape. Not to mention the mold growing on shoes and a musty smell to all the clothing that never completely dries. We're all looking forward to the return of the dry season! The one thing I *have* been thankful for is the cooler (that is a relative term!) weather...

August

We spent the first nine days of August with our first Gettysburg community delegation in several years! It was quite exciting for me to have an adult delegation for the first time. The trip started off a bit rough with flight delays in Miami and an arrival date a day and a half later than expected, but we hit the ground running once they landed in Nicaragua and Ofelia and I really enjoyed the time with this great group of people! Karl Mattson came down as the leader, joined by Will and Anne Lane, who had visited previously. The rest of the delegation consisted of two educators from the Gettysburg School district, a photographer (who took some AMAZING photos—check out the PGL Facebook group), one of Karl's daughters from the west coast and Colby, a rising high school senior from Littlestown.



We had a packed itinerary for the group. Some of our most enjoyable/memorable activities were: a welcome party with live music by Gustavo Bucardo, an up-and-coming young musician/composer living in León; an interactive meeting with some very dynamic teachers at Las Brisas, one of our sister schools; trudging through mud at Padre Ramos, the natural reserve where Ofelia did her thesis; and an overnight night in Santa Rosa (which helped our delegates greater appreciate their homes in León!) The photo at left shows Joan Peck, one of our delegates, working on her primitivist painting at Taller Artístico Xuchialt. And one of the best parts of the delegation was the new group of host families that we had in the neighborhood of El Laborio—just three blocks away from the parque central!

We were also pleased to have Urbana High School Spanish professor Chris Staubb with us for two weeks in August. Chris came down as part of a teacher exchange between Urbana High School and the Secondary School in Santa Rosa del Penon, one of the sister school relationships that PGL helps facilitate. Chris spent the majority of his time in Nicaragua in Santa Rosa, helping his counterpart, English professor Iran Andrades with English classes. The exchange was an important step in moving towards sister school relationships that focus more on relationship-building and developing pedagogical skills/capacities in teachers here, rather than just sending monetary or material donations.

As I mentioned in my last quarterly report, Urbana High School raised enough money to send two artists from Taller Artístico Xuchialt up to Urbana this October to work on a collaborative mural and to do cultural presentations about Nicaragua. Thus, the rest of August was spent busily preparing all the paperwork William and Marvin would need for their visa applications to the U.S.

In August, the sister-city projects (there are several in addition to Gettysburg-- New Haven, Minnesota, Hamburg, Zaragoza, Utrecht, Salzburg, just to name a few!) in Leon also began meeting again more regularly to discuss projects, experiences and some of our frustrations with development work. There have been various points in time in my last three and a half years here when we have tried to meet regularly to coordinate work, but with the busy schedules of all the representatives here, the frequency of the meetings always ends up fading. It's a little strange for me, because there has been a huge turnover in a lot of the sister city projects in the last year. Many of the coordinators that had been here for five, six, seven years have left, and now *I* am one of the "oldest" coordinators around!

September

September was a very busy month. Both Ofelia and I were working hard preparing for William, Marvin and Ofelia's trip up to Gettysburg/Urbana, while at the same time plan for a visit from Gettysburg College Professor Caroline Hartzell's senior seminar on "Women and the Political Economy of Development." I took William and Marvin at the beginning of the month for their visa interview at the U.S Embassy. We also made two additional trips to Managua to meet with different women's institutions in preparation for the Gettysburg College delegation. We had never done a delegation with a focus on Women's Issues, so it provided a great opportunity for us to make new contacts and to see what other institutions are doing in the area of Gender.



On September 16, I facilitated another portion of the Business Planning Workshop series with Taller Artistico Xuchialt (photo at left). We are nearing the end of the process and this session focused on financial statements. We spent the majority of the time identifying their fixed and variable costs and calculating their Point of Equilibrium. Our next workshop will be held on November 2.

September is a bit of crazy month in this country. There are a lot of holidays and festivals celebrated this month. Independence Day is celebrated on September 14 and 15. September 24 is the Dia de la Merced, the Patron Saint of León—another large cause for celebration. There are also two days where San Jeronimo is celebrated and the streets are filled with saint processions, cross dressers and colorful paper mache bulls.

October



It's not often that we have two delegations in one month, but October was one of those months! We had the TAX delegation (and Ofelia) that headed up to Gettysburg on October 1. Marvin, William and Ofelia were in Gettysburg to open the Ragged Edge primitivist painting exhibit, as well as for the Salsa on the Square dance. Shortly afterwards, Marvin and William headed up Urbana, where they were hosted by a few our former delegates from the June Urbana Delegation. They completed a mural at Urbana (see photo at left!) and made numerous folkloric dance presentations to history and Spanish classes. Ofelia spent an additional week in Gettysburg meeting PGL members and doing presentations in local schools.

On October 11, seventeen Gettysburg College seniors and three faculty members came down for a seven-day whirlwind introduction to women's issues in Nicaragua. Since Ofelia was still up in Gettysburg, I led the delegation with the assistance of Perla Sanchez, a young Nicaraguan architect that had worked with me on a past delegation. The week went extremely well and the students left having been exposed to a broad range of issues affecting women in Nicaragua. We conducted personal interviews regarding family, work and women's representation in Fundeci, debated cultural "machismo" issues with UNAN social work students (photo at right), visited a very successful women's agricultural group in Telica and heard firsthand about the impact that microcredit has had in the lives of female beneficiaries of ProMujer—and those were just the highlights! All in all, an extremely successful delegation!



Afterwards, it was back to work on the El Porvenir water project. Bob the Canadian has been brought on board as a paid consultant to help us get things done. He and I have been working to get quotes and specs of fuel engines in

Managua and on October 23, we went to visit several distributors to check out engines in person. We have settled on a 10 hp KIA fuel engine (cost: U\$990) to replace the electrical motor that had originally been bought and installed by a Bucknell brigade last summer.

Current events

Throughout the course of the different meetings, our October GC delegation was told about a number of the things happening under the current government, some of which are directly affecting the women's movement in Nicaragua. One of the most addressed issues was the penalization of therapeutic abortion. Since the writing of the constitution in the 1890s, women had the right to terminate a pregnancy if the doctor determined that carrying the child to term was a threat to the mother's life. Right before presidential elections in 2006, representatives of the FSLN voted with the right wing party, the PLC, (with whom they had made a "Pact") in the National Assembly to basically reverse this right and penalize therapeutic abortions. Women's rights organizations have been active in trying to overturn this law, organizing protests, marches, forums and other actions. Government minister Ana Isabel Morales calls campaigns to decriminalize therapeutic abortion "illegal." She is quoted as saying, "These campaigns try to decriminalize abortion. It's big business. This is an illegal campaign because it is promoting something that the Penal Code says is a crime and they are engaging in conspiracy to commit a crime; these are crimes against life, against the children who would be born."

It gets crazier. Just in the last few months, several NGOs have come under attack by the government. The NGOs have either been connected to women's movements, or vocally critical of the government (or both!). Oxfam-Great Britain and the Center for Communications Research (CINCO) are two of the seventeen NGOs accused by officials of money laundering. They are being charged with triangulating funds-- illegally passing funds to the Autonomous Women's Movement (MAM). The two individuals at the forefront of CINCO, Carlos Fernando Chamorro and Sofia Montenegro, have both publicly been very critical of the government over the past year. The Nicaraguan Center for Human Rights (CENIDH) said that President Daniel Ortega's government is carrying out "selective political persecution" against the nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) that oppose him.

On Sept. 20, people identifying themselves as Sandinistas prevented an opposition march and rally from taking place in the city of Leon. Attacks on opposition demonstrators wounded five people; many more were bruised and battered. Sandinistas burned a car belonging to the president of the Sandinista Renovation Movement (MRS), Enrique Saenz. The opposition march was organized by the Democratic Coalition of the West including the Movement for Nicaragua, which was created and funded by the US International Republican Institute of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED), as well as the United Citizenry for Democracy, the Civil Coordinator, among others. Incidentally, the U.S. International Republican Institute and the Civil Coordinator are two other institutions being persecuted by the government.

Robert Callahan, the new U.S. Ambassador in Nicaragua, wrote a letter to Foreign Minister Samuel Santos expressing his "profound concern" about the investigation by the Nicaraguan government of the International Republican Institute (IRI), one of the four NED core groups, and warned that it could result in a deterioration in bilateral relations. The Nicaraguan Supreme Electoral Council has accused the IRI of intervening in Nicaragua's electoral politics and an IRI spokesperson admitted in 2006 to a U.S. Nicaragua Network delegation that they "created" the opposition group Movement for Nicaragua.

On Oct. 22, the European Union released a statement which expressed concern about what it called the harassment of non-governmental organizations in Nicaragua by the Ortega government. The statement said that accusations through the media against NGOs and civil society representatives should not be substituted for legal processes in the courts. The statement questioned what the "true objectives of these intimidation maneuvers" were. The document went on to say that EU countries consider that NGOs "play an essential part in the democratic life and development of Nicaragua" and confirmed the commitment of EU countries to continue to include NGOs in their foreign aid to Nicaragua.

From the government's perspective, they are doing this to prevent interference in their country. The Bush regime's accelerated use of the National Endowment for Democracy (NED) and US Agency for International Development (USAID) to fund NGO's throughout Latin America to destabilize the growing number of progressive governments has increased distrust of NGO's in Nicaragua and elsewhere. Nicaraguan Vice-Minister for Foreign Affairs Valdrack

Jaentschke said on Oct. 1 that his office had met with foreign organizations that fund non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in the country to warn them that they must comply with regulations and cannot finance NGOs in order to intervene in Nicaragua's internal affairs. He also told them that the funds provided must be used strictly for the purposes established in the covenants they sign. He said that NGOs which receive money from abroad will be closely watched because some of them try to substitute for political parties.

PGL's covenant with the Ministry of Foreign Relations expired a few months ago and there has been a long delay in the renewal of the document. I have been told that the delay is due to the rewriting of the covenants and I imagine they will be rewritten to prevent the things that Jaentschke mentioned above.



Mayoral elections here in Nicaragua will be held on Nov 9. It will be interesting to see which party wins the majority of the local elections. If there really is as much discontent as seems with the current government, you would think that people would be inclined to vote for the right wing, and indeed, in Managua, the PLC mayoral candidate, Montealegre (who lost the presidential elections to Ortega in 2006) has created an alliance of "Todos Contra Ortega" (All Against Ortega). The photo at the left is of the FSLN mayoral candidate in León, Manuel Calderón. Yes, he would be the one with the wooden bat in his hand threatening police. Needless to say, I am worried for León's future if Calderón wins. Unfortunately, despite this extremely unprofessional, thug-like behavior, León has historically almost always had a FSLN mayor, and this may or may not have affected his "electibility." We'll see in a little over a week.

I had an interesting conversation last night with my friend Nick, a British ex-pat (who i'm sure the August Delegation will remember having met). He is the only Daniel-supporting ex-pat that I know. I was asking him what he thought would happen in the mayoral elections, and I thought his insight was quite interesting. He said that the current issues against the FSLN right now-- with it being a supposed "dictatorship," the penalization of therapeutic abortion and the political prosecution of NGOs-- these issues, he said, are mainly middle-class and upper-class issues. The poor people don't really care that much about Daniel being called a dictator or most likely aren't even aware of the political persecution going on with NGOs. What is most important to the poor people are access to credit, help with housing, education, infrastructure improvements... and those ARE things that the government has been doing--- perhaps even better than past governments. So he thinks that poor people are still going to vote for the FSLN and since the country is still majority poor people, he thinks that FSLN will still win the majority of the mayoral elections... I thought that was interesting, and I think he might be right. It will be interesting to see the results after the 9th.

There's lots more to mention, but not enough space (and some of you have probably gotten bored) so for more information, you can check out Nicaragua Network at <http://www.nicanet.org/>, which is where I got a lot of this info.

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