



New Haven/León Sister City Project

Spring 2010 Newsletter

Reflections from a Teacher's Delegation

A light brown salamander appears from behind the bulletin board and scampers across the sea-green wall. The paint is peeling and scuff marks cover much of the wall. The Styrofoam bulletin board is also scuffed and peeling. Some of the charming small children's chairs have beautiful paintings of flowers and I admire the cursive writing on one chair: **Vivan los ninos**.

These are among the first impressions I experienced mid-morning of the Monday when our delegation of North American teachers invaded the preschool classroom in Goyena, Nicaragua. Thirteen preschool children sit on small chairs against the wall. Marta, the teacher, calls each student's name and each answers in turn with the response, "presente". Then students politely and shyly introduce themselves before they sing a song in unison, using gestures to capture the actions of the lyrics.

Transitioning, the teacher and students move the small chairs from the wall to separated tables, accommodating six to eight students each. Marta rips plain white paper and passes out half a sheet per child. She circulates to sharpen pencils as needed and instructs students to draw pictures of their family. The teacher guardedly holds a handful of crayons that she distributes sparingly to children, only as needed. As one boy struggles to begin, Marta takes his hand in her own, helping him draw a stick figure.

As the morning ends, parents or siblings pick up the children by horse, motorcycle, or in most cases, by foot or bicycle. By now, sweat clings my shirt to my back and my pants to the under side of my knees as I savor the occasional breeze. I look along the horizon and a sense of serenity and harmony moves across me. I admire the beautiful vista, with its natural landscape of mountains, trees, and vegetation in a range of brown and green hues, and sprinkled with a few pockets of pink and rose from the flowering trees.

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Teachers delegation from February 2010. From left: Aaron Jafferis, Judy Panciera, Stephanie Santos, Allison Batson, Jen Goldberg with Mara, Delegation Coordinator Erendira Vanegas, Fran Dennis, and General Coordinator Rene Vanegas.

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Support Early Childhood Education in Nicaragua

NH/LSCP is collecting supplies (or funds to purchase them) for the Preschool in Goyena. **Needs include:** Blocks, Colored cubes, Legos, Peg boards w/ pegs, Puzzles, Books (alphabet, rhyming, board and picture in Spanish), Finger puppets (for teacher story telling), Fat crayons in basic colors, Construction paper, Paint brushes, Color markers, Educational posters in Spanish.

For a complete list, or to discuss organizing a drive to collect materials/funds, contact Chris.

Reflections from a Teacher's Delegation



Jen Goldberg (seated) with Delegation Coordinator Erendira Vanegas teaching how to use manipulatives in the preschool.

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Meanwhile, Mara, my five-year old daughter, is with Mariela, her babysitter for the week and the mother of a seven-year old son named Angel. Mara and Angel become close friends immediately, holding hands as Angel calls out to her, "Vamanos, Mara!" There was no concern with the fact that one spoke only English and one only Spanish. When I later caught up with them, I saw that they were playing with an old, chipped plastic tea set. My initial reaction is concern that Mara is drinking the water. With a grin on her face, she allays my fears by explaining that they are feeding the pig. Each morning of the trip, Mara asked in eager anticipation if we were going to Goyena. There, she was surrounded not only by caring adults and friendly children, but also a medley of free-roaming animals: pigs, horses, cats, dogs, chickens, etc.

Not once during our entire visit did Mara comment on the small size of the homes, the lack of electricity and running water, the absence of TV, or the crowded classrooms. We both enjoyed our experiences so much – the warm hospitality of the Nicaraguan people and the beautiful countryside – we sometimes lost sight of the real poverty that exists in their communities -- and their education system, in particular.

Although our delegation spent

only 8 days in Nicaragua, some major issues affecting the quality of education jumped out at us immediately after observing their schools and talking to the teachers, students, and parents. For example, there is almost a total absence of books and extremely limited supplies in the schools, particularly in Goyena. While we did note that the older students had individual notebooks and

pencils, there were no other books seen in any of our Goyena observations. Teachers receive limited teacher training and their salaries are extremely low, especially in rural areas, requiring most of them to hold second or third jobs just to earn a living. In fact, the two preschool teachers in Goyena have not received any pay so far this year from the Ministry of Education,

who claim they simply lack the necessary funds.

While the normal classroom size in the United States is 25 students, the required "minimum" size of a classroom in Nicaragua is 40 students. Despite such limitations, the teachers we observed in Nicaragua are dedicated to the education of these children and want to create interesting, challenging lessons for their students. Our delegation of teachers is committed to helping provide resources for these dedicated teachers – from providing classroom supplies to teacher training.

Jen Goldberg is Assistant Professor and the Director of the Elementary Education Program at the Graduate School of Education and Allied Professions at Fairfield University and is a member the NH/LSCP Advisory Committee on Education.

Maternal Deaths in Nicaragua Decrease by 25%

Over the last three years, maternal death rate in Nicaragua has continuously decreased. Data from the Ministry of Health indicated a drop from 107 maternal deaths in 2007, to 94 in 2008 and 90 in 2009. MINSA noted, however, that much work remained to be done.

The causes of maternal death continue to be the same, said Dr. Maribel Hernandez, director of Bertha Calderon Hospital, including post birth hemorrhaging and obstructed births. She emphasized that greater complications can be avoided by seeking medical attention and following doctors' hygiene and nutritional recommendations. Hernandez explained further, "Responsibility for seeking active and ongoing care during pregnancy does not solely fall on the mother. It is also her spouse's responsibility." One of the primary causes for maternal death, especially in rural areas, is poor access to health services for rural women. In many cases, husbands have not permitted their wives to seek medical

help due to a lack of male education on the topic and issues of machismo.

A further risk to maternal health is in Nicaraguan law. All abortions are illegal in the country, including therapeutic procedures and those needed to save the life of the mother. Women's groups are active in changing this legislation, but the forces martialled against this are daunting. Both the Roman Catholic Church, among other churches and groups, as well as the FSLN staunchly backed the legislation.

Adapted from Nicaragua News Bulletin, April 13, 2010. Women's welfare permeates all of our work. We thought you would be interested in this very important aspect of women's health in Nicaragua.

Pesticides in Nicaragua

The use of pesticides in Nicaragua has a large negative impact on the health of the citizens and farmers as well as on the environment. Poor farmers are exposed to toxic chemicals on a daily basis, afflicting them with a number of cancers and reproductive problems. Environmental issues include decrease in biodiversity, water contamination and soil degradation, which decreases future crop yields.

In the early 1950's, cotton emerged as an important export for the Nicaraguan economy. Along with the spread of cotton plants came a problem: the boll weevil. Farmers turned to a variety of chemicals and pesticides to control the pests. After just over a decade of this harmful method of farming, Central America was the recipient of 40% of the United States' total annual exports of pesticides (\$35 billion of pesticides are sold globally each year.). Between 1962 and 1972, Nicaragua experienced about 3,000 poisonings a year.

One particularly harmful pesticide was methyl parathion, banned in Nicaragua due to its effects. Because cotton was such an important export for Nicaragua's economy, Anastasio Somoza, the dictator at the time, overruled this decision. As a result, the departments of Leon and Chinandega experienced anywhere from 312 to 1,187 poisonings per year from 1976 to 1980.

Another major problem in Nicaragua was the widespread use of organochlorines such as DDT. Several

studies conducted in the 1970's named the residents of the Nicaraguan and Guatemalan cotton growing regions as the people in the world with the highest levels of DDT in their bodies.

The banana industry used equally harmful pesticides to rid the crops of pests, such as dibromochloropropane (DBCP), which was sold under the commercial name Nemagon. The US Environmental Protection Agency banned the use of DBCP in the continental United States in 1979 after testing revealed it caused sterility and respiratory problems in workers exposed for long periods. Exportation continued to many developing countries including places in Latin America, Africa, and Asia a decade after it was banned in the United States.

Between 1949-1965, cotton farmers in Nicaragua experienced steady increases in production but this success was short-lived, partly due to declining soil quality. The 1965-1966 season saw a decline of 11% compared with the previous season's yields. Pesticides and pesticide residues also wash into lakes and rivers when it rains, causing contamination of local water sources. In 1981, a study concluded that 75% of Nicaraguan water sources were seriously polluted by agricultural residues.

Starting in 1979, after the Revolution overthrew Somoza, the Government of National Reconstruction (GNR) instated many pesticide controls and programs. The Sandinista policies focused on long-term environmental progress that would increase development. This strategy proved to be successful because it was economically beneficial while improving human health and the quality of the environment. These policies were abandoned in favor of quick economic fixes during the mid-eighties due to U.S. economic pressure and the Contra war.

Other sustainable methods of farming such as trap-cropping and



Pesticide exposure has resulted in sterility, high rates of miscarriage, and deformities in children.

polyculture are possible alternatives to industrial agriculture which goes hand in hand with the overuse of pesticides. To be successful, these policies need to have governmental support, educational programs, and adequate resources.

Kristen Van Vleck is a senior at Fairfield University. She traveled to Nicaragua in the fall of 2008 to study at Universidad Centroamericana and returned in the summer of 2009 to conduct water research in León. She worked as an intern in the NHLSCP office in 2009.

Update on NSEL Struggle

The negotiations between Nicaragua Sugar Estates Limited (NSEL), ASOCHIVIDA (the organization of ex-cane workers) and the World Bank are continuing over resolving the health and environmental problems related to sugar cane production. The Boston University team chosen to study the causes of the chronic renal failure (that has resulted in the death of over 1500 workers) has been on the ground and recently did an industrial hygiene survey to evaluate the health and safety aspects of the workplace. Members of ASOCHIVIDA also toured the NSEL plantations and facilities with the BU team, and the BU team is also taking water samples.



Acute pesticide poisonings (APP) in Nicaragua are severely under-reported.

The Crisis Next Door: Impunity Reigns in Honduras

The first thing you need to know about Honduras in the Spring of 2010 is that nothing is over, nothing resolved. Don't believe what you read in the papers.

Last June, Honduran soldiers kidnapped President Manuel Zelaya from his home in the capital city of Tegucigalpa, and eventually deposited him, still in his pajamas, on a runway in Costa Rica. Throughout Honduras, electricity and media outlets were cut; televisions displayed only cartoons or fuzz. When live TV came back later that day, Hondurans saw General Romeo Vasquez Velasquez –twice trained at the U.S. Army School of the Americas –swearing in the head of the National Congress Roberto Micheletti as interim president.

People took to the streets in protest of the coup, and the military took to the streets in protest of the people. The media sometimes reported that “police and protesters clashed.” The truth is that batons and bullets do not “clash” with flesh. A more appropriate verb would be something less equal and more

sickening.

Secretary of State Hillary Clinton and other State Department actors, including Otto Reich and John Negroponte, would have the world believe that the elections held in November, held in a context of violent intimidation and boycotted by the anti-coup movement, restored order. The truth is that last year's coup unleashed an apparatus of '80's-style state terror and repression in Honduras, and the repression continues under the government of the new president, Porfirio “Pepe” Lobo. Those who challenge the coup and the corporate interests backing it are being killed and are disappearing.

The week of March 21, 2010, a teacher involved in the resistance was shot dead on school grounds, in front of students. Weeks prior, a judge who had recently decided against the police in a case filed by a prominent gay-rights activist, whom the police had detained and abused three years ago, was shot dead outside her house. Members of a union of national uni-

versity employees have been charged with sedition for their involvement with the nonviolent resistance movement. These are just a handful of recent stories, examples among many.

Last November's elections and the subsequent transfer of power in January did nothing to 'restore order.' While a campaign of deadly repression against union members, teachers, feminists, human rights advocates, and journalists steadily increases, Ms. Clinton has praised the Lobo administration and advocated for the United States to restore all financial and military aid to the Honduran government.

To learn more about what's happening in Honduras, and to learn how to support the nonviolent resistance movement against the coup, please visit the Quixote Center website: www.quixote.org.

Sydney Frey, former program director at the NH/LSCP, spent August-December 2009 in Tegucigalpa, Honduras with the Quixote Center.



Left: A participant in an August, 2009 march carries a sign reading, 'Brother soldier, you too are exploited.'



Center: The National Resistance Front Against the Coup marched rallied every day from July to November, 2009.



School Stories from Nicaragua



Genesis

Genesis and **Ronal** are 5 year olds who attend the third level of preschool. These children live in the community of Goyena Sur, which is 2 km away from school. They are transported to school daily by their parents or siblings and are very excited when they get home from school to say what they have learned in preschool - coloring, counting, singing, playing with their peers, and they go home singing the songs they learned that day.

Mariela Garcia is a young 23 year old woman who could not study when she was younger because of the lack of support she received from her parents. They felt that studying was not important for her life. But two years ago Mariela decided to attend literacy classes that were being offered in her community. Mariela has a son named Angel who is in 2nd grade. Now Mariela and Angel are studying together and learning new and interesting things, and Mariela can now help Angel with his homework.

Luisa Quiroz is a 30 year old woman. When she was younger she could not pursue her studies due to economic circumstances and the lack of importance that her parents placed on education. In 2008 the community of Goyena opened a literacy circle in which she was able to learn to read and write. She says that changed her life. She now has another perspective on life and on the impor-

tance of education for herself and her children. She feels very happy to read and write, to go out and read what a sign says, and to do so without her children or another person telling her what something says.

Darwin is a 14 year old adolescent who lives in Abangasca. This young man travels 14 kilometers each day to go to Miguel Larreynaga School in Goyena. He is an active kid, and during 2009 was able to attend courses on dealing with unlearning violence organized by the NHLSCP. This helped to change his attitude as a young, macho and a bit aggressive youth. Through these trainings and daily classes he continued to learn to respect others as a man and how to respect women both within his families and among his classmates.



Angel and Mariela

Claudia, Eliecer, Fani Roxana, Augusto, Fernando, and Belkis are a group of 5th grade children who for four years straight attended school together in the mornings followed by the NHLSCP after school program. They now have a different view on life and speak of values, goals and their aspirations in life, and they think that education is essential in their daily lives. Even though they can't attend the after school program any longer (it's only available to 1st to 4th graders) they are seeking alternative ways to study in the evenings and to interact and share



Anabell (right)

among themselves. This shows that you can change the minds of children with continuing involvement in their lives.

Anabell Donaire is 23 years old. She had to stop school for 4 years because her parents had no money or resources to send her to León for secondary school. But in 2008 Anabell, who was the teacher for one of the literacy circles that developed in her community, was able to return to her studies in secondary school because of support from New Haven SCP. In 2009 and 2010 she received a scholarship to continue her studies outside the community (in León), as Goyena did not offer classes for her level. In exchange for the scholarship (provided by Viviendas León delegates), Anabell teaches one of the after-school classes in Goyena. She is very pleased with this, feels very useful helping community children, and enjoys learning everyday as she works with the kids. This year is her final year of secondary school. Her studies have changed the vision she had for her life, and she now thinks of possibly attending university and continuing her education.

Stories compiled by Ivet Fonseca, NHLSCP Education Coordinator in León.

One World House Exhibit

NH/LSCP has constructed a full size model (8ft x 8ft x 9ft) of a house typical in rural communities in Nicaragua with nine educational banners that describe the impact of climate change on vulnerable rural communities, the science of climate change, and what we can do to mitigate the impacts. The House can be set up at schools, churches, parks and invites people to think about climate change and what it means for especially vulnerable communities. Contact NH/LSCP for more information.



"A community is the mental and spiritual condition of knowing that the place is shared, and that the people who share the place define and limit the possibilities of each other's lives." -Wendell Berry

Get Involved! ¡Anímate!

"The future is an infinite succession of presents, and to live now as we think human beings should live, in defiance of all that is bad around us, is itself a marvelous victory."
Howard Zinn

- **Intern in Nicaragua - education, public health, community development**
- **Volunteer/intern in New Haven**
- **Organize/join a delegation (teachers especially wanted!)**

For more information contact Chris at 203-562-1607 or nh@newhavenleon.org

