

Nicaragua: There and Back Again

Janice Butler, Director of Service-Learning at Bucknell University

On May 13, 2006 a group of 19 individuals, ranging in age from 14 to 84, set off for a hot and exotic destination. Not a vacation, this trip was a service-learning experience, an opportunity to help those less fortunate, learn about another culture, and understand the impact of U.S. policies and ex-patriates.

My sixth trip to Nicaragua finds me still amazed and awed by the land and the people of this nation. Along with Haiti, it is the poorest country in the western hemisphere and while the poverty is overwhelming, the resiliency of its people to withstand political oppression, wars, earthquakes, hurricanes, and deprivation is somehow inspiring.

Impressions

It's over 95 degrees when we arrive and the heat remains most of the week. I resign myself to being constantly sweaty and sticky, but we do get a reprieve with the rainy season just around the corner. An occasional thunderstorm cools things to the mid-70s one night and knocks down the dust that accumulates everywhere.

On our first day we visit an active volcano in Masaya National Park, an old fortress now maintained by the boy scouts, and the capitol city of Managua. We're lucky it's a clear day and can see deep into the volcanic crater without breathing too many of the sulphuric fumes. The hike to the rim of a nearby extinct volcano offers incredible vistas of lakes and greenery not seen in the lowlands of the city.

In Managua, we visit the Plaza of the Revolution where the Sandinistas rode triumphantly into the city on tanks having ousted the dictator Somoza in 1979. On one side of the square sits the National Palace where corrupt government officials once did business. It is now a museum flanked by the old National Cathedral, a haunting example of Spanish colonial architecture that was badly damaged in the 1972 earthquake and remains abandoned. In comparison, the new cathedral across town, a massive, square concrete edifice topped by small domes was built in 1993 by Tom Monaghan, the Domino's pizza magnate, who spent over \$4 million. We also visit a community church with a beautiful mural in the Batahola barrio where our group is warmly welcomed at the outdoor mass.

Women's sewing cooperative

With official unemployment at 80% in Nueva Vida, JHC recognized that finding jobs was a top priority. Through micro-loans and networking, they have been able to help a number of groups find meaningful work and markets for their products. A group of dedicated women from Nueva Vida rejected their fate in Managua's sweat shops and instead worked for two years without pay to literally build and learn to operate a garment manufacturing plant. Currently about 40 individuals are employed there. The motto of the women's sewing coop, which is now the first worker-owned free trade operation in the world, is "Our sweat, our sale, our success." I asked one woman seated at a machine on Saturday how many sleeves she sewed in a day and the response was 1,500 to 1,600.

They were working on the weekend to meet a deadline for an order to be shipped overseas. Among their products are organic cotton t-shirts, camisoles, pants, and onesies. Co-op leaders, women without much formal education who live in one-room cement block houses, now travel to international conferences to tell their story and advocate for fair trade initiatives. Ruth, one of the original members of the co-op, shared her experiences with the group after a tour of the site.

El Porvenir Coffee Cooperative

During our stay, we took a three-hour trek to the remote village of El Porvenir, a community of 47 families perched on a mountain. Our sturdy yellow school bus can make it only so far up the steep unpaved dusty road and so most of us were hauled to the top while standing in the back of a trailer pulled by a tractor.

This community, consisting of former contras, National Guard, and Sandinistas makes its living growing and selling organic rustic shade grown coffee, which we sell at Bucknell and elsewhere. That morning beverage so many of us rely on has a very interesting beginning in developing nations such as Nicaragua, so it was intriguing to consider how it is grown, harvested, processed, transported, traded, marked up, marketed, and sold to consumers in the first world. After lunch we worked spreading organic fertilizer on some coffee plants, hiked to the ridge to see some beautiful vistas of nearby Honduras and Las Casitas volcano. It took more than two hours to get down the mountain as dusk fell and rain approached because the car in front of us was kicking up a lot of dust, making it impossible to see the people, oxen, goats, and bicycles traveling the narrow winding road.

Work

Throughout the week, the volunteers worked on different projects. Painting the roof of the women's sewing cooperative with a special reflective coating was hot and dirty work, but one that would provide a real pay off in terms of keeping the cement building cooler under the scorching sun. At the health clinic, the gray cement walls of exam rooms and bathrooms were also being painted. The bright white made the facility look more finished and professional according to the Nicaraguan staff and patients. An artistic project took shape outside the clinic when volunteers worked on a mural depicting a typical Nicaraguan landscape, with mountains, a lake and humble homes. Finally, another group worked on pouring a concrete floor for a workshop and store room at the free trade zone compound.

All in all, the volunteers from this delegation, as is true of previous Brigades, came home feeling like they got more than they gave. One commented, "we are exceptionally ignorant of the situation in other countries," and another individual echoed "we take things for granted." While most Nicaraguans live on less than \$2 a day, their spirit and courage, their ability to work hard and cultivate optimism are lessons we humbly bring home. Along with our purchased souvenirs, I carry a sense of our obligation as members of a privileged and powerful society.

Gracias a la vida, Nicaragua.