



OCCASIONAL REPORT
September 2007

URGENT-TEACHERS NEEDED IMMEDIATELY:

- 1) ENGLISH AS A 2ND LANGUAGE
- 2) COMPUTING.

PLEASE TAKE NOTE AND RELAY ANY INFORMATION ABOUT POTENTIAL VOLUNTEER TEACHERS TO ME.

Hello all. Just back from Nicaragua and Escuela San Miguel (ESM) where I stayed in our volunteer house. The trip went well except that the homeland security people thought my peanut butter was a secret weapon and confiscated it, leaving me w/o for 2 months, and on the way home from the airport my old Toyota pickup brakes went out. We did Nicaraguan roadside repairs, limped into Rivas and got them fixed. Otherwise the trip was very worthwhile as I will fill you in.

We had to say adios to our 1st Peace Corps volunteer, grand supporter of ESM and my friend Melissa Benedict while I was there. Melissa has been with us for 2 full years, starting before we even officially opened the school. She has helped the school, students and the people of Cárdenas immensely over that time assisting the director, the committee, and myself in addition to advising and tutoring students along with her teaching duties both at ESM and in the Cárdenas public school. Know you are missed Melissa but that your memory and thoughtfulness to the end lives on.

We are again fortunate to have another Peace Corps volunteer follow Melissa. Mr. Henry Greeley. I was sure glad to be on hand to meet him and get acquainted. Henry comes to us from Seattle, WA and is a recent graduate of Willamette University in Salem, OR where he earned a BA degree in Economics. He will be teaching the small business course "The Creative Enterprise" to high school students in Cárdenas and at ESM. Additionally, Henry will be working closely with Jacobo Sanchez our school director with the management, administration and financial aspects of ESM. He is also filling in as English teacher until we obtain another. Welcome Henry!

Additionally, Laura Schleifer has just finished after her six month stint teaching ESL in our school. Laura did a magnificent job incorporating her knowledge and experience of acting, singing and screenwriting to the class. The students loved her and she is missed already. So, thank you Laura for your time talent and treasure bringing fresh ideas and techniques to the tough task of teaching ESL. You said you wanted to come back and know that you are welcome. Is next week too soon?

I want to say hello and thank you again to all of our past volunteer teachers, who continue to support, work with and monitor things at ESM. These include, in addition to Melissa and Laura, Salomé Phillmann, Paul and Erica Johnson, Denise Juppé, Darla Fitzpatrick, and Cameron Alford. Many people often ask about all of you.

First order of business was to assist the committee mediate some relationship problems. Thankfully this went well with the committee taking charge. However, following this we held a committee meeting and the budget report revealed that the budget was in dire straits. A series of minor setbacks and overly optimistic projections had the budget nearly drained. Some of this is due to communication problems. I had told them the year previous that PFP would budget \$12,000 per year for ESM operations in the hopes that this would be adequate, that they would begin attempts to make some money for school operations by marketing school and student made furniture & clothes, and also to force them into a better budgeting process. Well, the 12,000 is not adequate yet. They had to replace two teachers and had to pay for severance and vacation. The expenses for transportation keep going up due to fuel costs (\$4.00/gal) and additional trips to bring in students from Sapoa (12 mi.). Energy costs keep increasing and the country is so energy short (See paragraph below about the state of Nicaragua) that there is now electricity blackouts of 4 hrs. or more/day causing use of the generator to run the school. We get about 10 hrs. from a 100 lbs. of propane that cost \$50.00. And the electricity bill does not seem to decrease any even with the heavy generator use. Also they had donations from local landowners of two big trees and the harvesting and cutting into transportable boards and planks (using a chainsaw) was unexpected, though fruitful for the lumber we obtained. Anyway, bottom line is looks like it will take \$16-18,000.00 U.S. dollars/year to maintain the school.

I left \$7,000.00 with Felipe to pay for his needs and the school's so that should carry them through March or so. We have about \$4,000.00 in the bank again thanks to habitual (and what a good habit it is) contributors. But we also have additional needs over and above operating and maintenance. Transportation costs are now in the range of \$5,000.00, almost 1/3 of the yearly budget. To try to overcome this we are looking for a truck, preferably a 4-wheel drive, 1 Ton, (or a 3/4 Ton "Camper Special"). We would modify it down there into a flat bed with benches to make it a "people hauler". The truck would serve dual purposes transporting lumber to the school and at some point when we are able to obtain a portable sawmill, to haul that to the forest. So, anyone having knowledge of a truck or portable sawmill that might be available for us as a donation or at least at low cost please let me dean@projectsforpeople.org or brother Jeff at jeff@projectsforpeople.org know right away.

Director Jacobo, Felipe, Professor Jony of the school committee and I met with an assistant minister of education about governmental aid for ESM and assistance in the accreditation process. She will help us and press for assistance in Managua.

The internet still has not arrived though it seems it is getting closer. We were told from the telephone company that we needed to have a commitment from eight clients in Cárdenas to pay the installation and monthly fees and they would string in the cable and we would have internet. So far we can only come up with six and they are not budging to bring in the cable. Perhaps this will happen soon though as I received a generous donation from Mr. Roland Dib of "Giving for Living" foundation to help with installation. Also along these lines past volunteer computer teacher Paul Johnson is working to try and secure for us the hardware, cables and connections necessary to equip our computer lab to make the internet fully functional in the classroom setting.

We tried out two potential woodworking instructors for a week at a time and finally settled on Don Ronaldo Avillan Gonzales. He is doing fine and has brought some new ideas and innovations to the shop. I am looking now for good woodworking project plans complete with materials lists, cut pieces, and step by step process for various furniture pieces. This type of thing is totally unavailable there. We searched everywhere, even in Managua to no avail. Also many of the electric tools needed maintenance that Felipe and I worked on for quite a few days. The tools we have are mostly of the “Do-It-Yourself” variety and are not commercial grade. They get a lot of use and are doing OK but they need constant attention. Felipe does well keeping them going. To help him in this effort I have purchased a small compressor and a shop vac for cleaning machines and parts. We’ve burned out a few motors and have had them repaired and are doing some “cannibalizing” to keep machines running. Electric motors are hard to come by there (seems everything is except bananas, rain and sun) so if you have some lying around in your garage we’d love to have them.

Also in shop related things we are running out of room as we have been storing all the lumber inside to keep it dry. So, one Saturday when we were in between teachers I helped the students construct a shed to store the lumber out of the rain and sun. I used one of the new worm-drive saws that Safway Supply donated at our friend Tim Welsh’s urging. The students were amazed seeing these saws cut through hardwood plank. If you haven’t tried one they are really something.

We also decided to find a hammock instructor and to that end Felipe and I made two trips to Masaya, where the trade is most prevalent. We found Hector Fuentes Flores an accomplished tradesman who accepted our offer to come to Cárdenas two days/week and train our students. I spent a couple days making the jigs to string the hammocks and away they went. Hector is very good and the students had 3 hammocks under construction when I left. We are going to retain him until December at which time we hope one of our students will be sufficiently trained to take over. Of course the hope is that some students will take up the trade and make them for sale.

From the very good side of things though, the school is running and we have 250 students that are taking advantage. It is warm and satisfying to see those students coming to school, laughing and joking like students do around the world. They are free for a time from the humdrum of their dreary existence and they relish the opportunity just come to a school that they can say is theirs and to learn new things. We even have a few original students now doing some part-time teaching and assisting others. It brings tears to my eyes to see this. By the grace of God we have change some lives. Also, as a reminder, Tim Welsh has set up and placed an initial \$10,000.00 in a scholarship fund, the interest of which will go to pay fees for the 30 students we have on scholarship. Anyone wishing to add to that fund please contact me and I will arrange with Tim.

I spent time when the students weren’t around trimming trees and the bougainvillea hedge. It is unbelievable the growth. Trees we planted only a year ago are 20 feet high and the bougainvillea hedge that we planted for some privacy in the volunteer house is totally filled in. (Salomé, you cannot see through to the street now.) Felipe and I have hacked it back dozens of times already.

I also want to tell you about progress at our sewing workshop “Doña Coco’s Centro de Costura” near Tola. Felipe and I visited Socorro (better known as Doña Coco) and she was excited to tell

of their acceptance by the government as an official cooperative. This, in addition to the normal advantages allows them preferred status for obtaining government grants and aid and will be advantageous for obtaining loans for the operation. There are 20 students and a teacher learning to sew and Doña Coco proudly showed off many items of student made clothing. Felipe and I spent the day constructing drains to divert and keep the rainwater away from and washing out the new cement stairway up to the center. Meanwhile Doña Coco continues to live in virtual poverty while she spends all her time and resources helping everyone else she feels doesn't have as much as her. She is a true Nicaraguan hero as Tim Welsh and Brother Jeff can attest.

Many of you ask about things in Nicaragua so I will give you my impressions. Nicaragua is in a jam and I am worried about the country. The poor have rallied around Daniel Ortega, but they continue to wait for improvements. These people are among the most patient and long-suffering in the world. It is hard for us to understand why there is not more dissent until you get to know the people and their history of wars, death and destruction that they know personally. Everyone has wartime dead family and friends. And thus they will endure almost anything with unbelievable patience to avoid repeating the past. They want to believe that Daniel can do it-and that, along with the euphoric memories of the initial Sandinista triumphs of old is all that got him elected in the end. Things have never been very good politically to say the least and of course it is always the poor who suffer. It continues. Ortega has aligned himself chiefly with Venezuela's Hugo Chavez and Cuba's Fidel Castro, not a surprise, but with Chavez taking a more vociferous anti-American, anti-President Bush stance Ortega finds himself and the country with nowhere to turn except to Chavez. Chavez after all helped bankroll Ortega's campaign, and Ortega's government is very weak due to the alliances (albeit unholy in the minds of many of the original founders of the Sandinista ideals who have abandoned Ortega) he had to form in order to win. To their credit, Cuba and Venezuela have been helping many with needed surgeries, paying for airline tickets to and from their countries, for hospital stays and doctor bills. But Nicaragua needs energy desperately with daily scheduled blackouts now rolling across the country. The streets of the cities are now filled with small generators as business owners try to hang on. We need our generator daily to run the school. Chavez promises more oil to the country and perhaps it will come, but for now they also do not have enough generating capacity, and they must upgrade and expand their ports to receive the oil.

So generally I have not seen much improvement. Parts of Managua, León and Granada seem to prosper. For the most part though that is due to expatriates buying up cheap (by U.S. standards) property and businesses and from the leftover rich who've remained in Managua. The only truly new investments in the country that I see are "Sweatshops" from God knows which multinational corporations, and the government pursues and embraces them with lucrative tax advantages and land. They point to these developments of course as successes of economic advancement and new jobs. And the people, forever without jobs flock to fill the cavernous buildings.

So I don't know. It is hard to predict. I have a fear though of one more poor and deprived campesino rising up out of the countryside with the charisma to attract followers and wanting better lives for himself and his people and seeing no other way than I pray not.

It is a little early though and hopefully Ortega will find a way to make improvements. Meanwhile, Japan continues to build hospitals, schools and bridges and there are thousands of

NGO's (including PFP) working all over Nicaragua trying to make a difference. So, we'll have to wait and see.

All for now. Check out our website www.projectsforpeople.org for some new photos and updates.

Peace, love and blessings to all, Dean