

SOCIOLOGY DEPARTMENT SPONSORS SERVICE-IMMERSION TRIP TO NICARAGUA

By Michael A. Malec

On February 27, 2004, eleven students and I left Chestnut Hill for the town of San Juan del Sur, Nicaragua. These travelers included my co-leader on this trip, Janet Smith (a doctoral student in the Lynch School of Nursing), and ten undergraduates: Lindsay Magura, Michael Chang, John Garcia, Jennifer Hall, Casey Sherman, Tamara Dawli, John Pavletic, Kaya Hazard, Ali Plocha, and Sean Corlett. The twelve people who returned nine days later include several who, in some important ways, were different from those who departed.

Nicaragua is, depending on the source, either the second- or third-poorest nation in the Western hemisphere. San Juan del Sur, located on the southwest coast, is perhaps better off than much of the country; it has a sizeable port that is scheduled for a major expansion, and nascent tourism and real estate industries. But its once-prosperous fishermen have, in the age of the supertrawler, fallen on hard times, and many boats sit idle in the port. Its population is about 10,000, with a similar number living very close by.

San Juan del Sur is a “sister city” of Newton, MA, and our trip was in part organized by the Newton/San Juan del Sur Sister City Project, Inc. (NSJSCP). This organization began in 1987 and has helped arrange more than a dozen volunteer group trips to San Juan to work on projects.

What We Did In San Juan

During our first morning in San Juan, we met with a half-dozen or so of the local leaders—the principal of the elementary school; a representative from the town library; the coach of the town’s youth base/softball teams; someone from the public health clinic; and others. These people told us something about their organizations, and described things that we might do during our short visit. After this initial meeting, our BC group met to discuss the various projects and to commit ourselves to one or several of them. Indeed, that very afternoon, five of us went to a special “Saturday high school” for “dropouts” and adult learners, to assist in their English language classes. Our simple presence as native speakers of English was a valuable resource, we were told.

Perhaps the greatest number of work hours was spent on “the mural project.” Monday morning, a few of us arrived at the town’s elementary school. The principal had indicated that she would like us to paint the newly constructed one-room school library. Doña Ana was a stern but loving taskmistress: two coats of paint, inside and out; the cinderblock had hundreds (it seemed like millions) of little holes that just had to be filled in with paint; and could we paint a mural on an exterior wall? Privately I blanched, but the students joyfully accepted the challenge and went to work. Some set off to purchase paint and brushes and turpentine; two others met with students to get ideas for the mural (“we want a rainbow, and fish, and sunshine and...”), and then with the art

teacher and principal to settle on the final design. Monday morning we met eight blank walls; by Friday afternoon, these walls were painted (two coats, of course) and the mural was...well, look for yourself.

Another project that five of us were privileged to join was the library's "bookmobile." San Juan del Sur boasts the first free lending library in all of Nicaragua. Its size is quite modest, perhaps 4000 volumes in three small rooms. Among the library's many programs, one especially stands out. Twice a week, a truck is loaded with books and visits one or two outlying rural schools. Students borrow and return books. On the day that three of us went with the bookmobile, we visited a school about 14 miles from town—the last 3 miles on a dirt road that could only be handled by a 4-wheel drive vehicle (or a 4-footed horse, mule, or ox). This school had electricity (some rural schools do not), but no running water. Of note is the fact that this school on that day received its first-ever visit from the library, the students received their first-ever library cards, and checked out their first-ever books! As an educator, I cannot tell you how happy I was on this day.



The Mural Project



How And With Whom We Lived

We stayed with local families, who generally spoke no English. I stayed with Carlos Guzman, who generously allowed his home to become the site of our evening gatherings—our daily reflection periods. The students, in twos or threes, stayed with: Sarita Pomares, the best cook in town; the Gonzalez family, whose patriarch, Emilio, or *el pajarito loco*, told us stories of the Sandinista days; Veronica & Efrain Carmona —Veronica is a teacher and member of the city council; the Moñiz family—Demetrio escorted us on our great adventure to “Da Flying Frog” canopy tour; and Roger Cantillano and his wife Lydia Garcia, with their beautiful extended family coming and going, and whose house is right across from the town square, and therefore a great place to sit and watch and learn about life in San Juan. I personalize these people because I believe that, for the students, the experience of living with these wonderful, warm, generous people was perhaps *the* high point of the entire trip. As one student wrote in his journal:

If God is love in the sense of agape (concern with a sense of sacrifice), I definitely experienced God through the people of San Juan. Their friendliness, thankfulness, and sense of what is important in life have rubbed off on me. My interaction with the people from San Juan del Sur has reinforced my belief that people and our relationships with those whom we love are what we must put first on our priorities list.

Our interactions with the everyday life of the people of San Juan affected us deeply. Another journal entry:

Service in Nicaragua

by
Mike Malec



Juan and Sean with the Gonzalez Family

I had the great fortune to sit and have coffee one afternoon with Doña Rosita Gonzalez and her grand-daughter Nadiesda... The simple act of having coffee together in the close quarters of the family dining area was both intimate and profound in scope: the conversation soon focused on Doña Rosita's life during the days after the Sandanista Revolution. She recounted how countries from around the

world offered assistance to show their support. The Swiss began building a hospital and clinics throughout the country, the Germans offered monetary aid for community buildings, the Russians and the Cubans sent doctors and teachers... She emphasized they taught her to read—that that was such a special gift, like no other. Listening intently to this story was Nadiesda, her grand-daughter who was attending her second year in university in Rivas. I was witnessing what the door-to-door literacy campaign had brought to this family in the short span of two generations: a place in an institute of higher learning, access to a world of knowledge that could complement and extend the knowledge of all the generations that came before. Local, personal efforts making a lasting difference, and in such short time.

I believe firmly that our very small “local personal efforts,” even in such a short time, also have made a lasting difference, perhaps not greatly in the lives of the sanjuañeros, but certainly in an important way in the lives of the twelve of us.

Janet's Comments

Janet Smith, my co-leader on this trip, is a former Peace Corps member who worked for four years in Costa Rica. As such, she brought special insights about Central America to us. One of her journal comments that she shared with me must be included in this narrative:

I was amazed day after day at the impact of the trip on the BC students. After only half a dozen pre-trip meetings and 8 days in Nicaragua, the BC students traversed ethical and personal landscapes that I usually think of happening over the course of years. The ambiguities of history, economic status and development, coupled with the immediacy of friendship and giving in a place like San Juan del Sur was a learning experience that from the first, evinced questions, concerns and joys from the students. And it has continued, back in the US, to prod and challenge the thinking of the BC students in a way that NO amount of coursework ever could. The Nicaragua trip was a form of education that has been permanently imprinted in all our minds, consciences, funny bones and hearts. The focus on service learning and the opportunity to live with families and choose how to spend our hours working with the people of San Juan was an opportunity without parallel to know and

serve others, and in the process, to know ourselves in a brand new way. It offered a vivid, authentic dimension to BC's focus on education for social justice. I feel I'm very fortunate to have been part of it.

My Conclusion

In every way that I can count, the trip was a great success. The planes were on time. No one got sick. But these are superficial aspects. What was most successful was the simple experience of living in a small town in Nicaragua, with people who were caring and generous. Many of the students have remained in touch with their families. In a few days, we will be sending a packet of letters, photos, medicine, etc., to our *amigos y familias* in San Juan. The students continue to stop by my office, and talk about their hope of one day, in the not too distant future, returning. They tell me how they now see the world in a new perspective, of how their values have shifted. Of course, I have no way of knowing how long these new views will hold. Time and distance can be very powerful foes. But I suspect that most of them will, for many years to come, have in their hearts a special place for the people of San Juan.



The "Flying Frog" Canopy Tour

[All photographs courtesy of Mike Malec. To see more pictures of San Juan, check his website at www2.bc.edu/~malec/.]

The Newton/San Juan del Sur Sister City Project, Inc. (NSJSCP) has helped organize more than a dozen volunteer group trips to San Juan, including church groups and Newton High School students and teachers, to work on projects. The projects focus mainly on the local pre-schools and elementary schools, and more recently on two health clinics. NSJSCP annually sends several large shipments of shoes, clothes, and school supplies, along with toys, tools, and sports equipment. Delegations have repaired leaking roofs and faulty electrical systems in various schools, and improved playgrounds; built fourteen primary and pre-schools; built two houses for teachers; installed water lines in poor barrios; supported the district's first free lending library, and much more. A teacher from San Juan was brought to Newton to study English in the Newton high schools. Newton's Underwood Elementary School hosts an annual book fair to raise funds for San Juan schools and, like many other schools, provides material aid for the shipment of the books. A great deal of useful information about the NSJSCP can be found on this web site:

<http://www.newtonsanjuan.org/>