

Reports from the 2016 Nicaragua Mission Trip

Friday, June 22: Forwards...number two

Farmers are being taught many improved techniques, including how to have a variety of crops and animals so that if one crop fails, others may support them. Marcio has hired someone whose sole job is to plant trees, an effort that is cutting down carbon emissions, and explained to us the efforts to depend only 10 percent on nonrenewable energy in the next few years. He had an ecological park built both to educate the population and increase tourism so that people kill fewer of the endangered animals to eat (even raccoons and squirrels are endangered because people eat them) and to educate them on natural plants that have medicinal purposes and provide food. (The preschoolers come here each week to be in and learn about nature.) The canon of Somoto has been developed without disturbing the people who have lived there for years, with a zipline, rappelling, cabanas, inner tube and canoe tours, in addition to tours of petroglyphs. If tourism increases, the ability to earn a living here will increase. They are applying for a UNESCO world heritage site in November. So yes, even impoverished people are working here to improve their country.

The communities are being taught to clean up, even around the outside of their house, to recycle, and to plant trees, among other things, with a government sponsored theater that tours villages and performs on the streets. Even those with us who do not speak Spanish understood their message. What a creative ad campaign!

The student exchange group from Malone University in Ohio, led by Jack Harris who came with us last year at our invitation to setup an exchange, has been learning about their efforts in Somoto on many levels and yesterday presented their ideas to the city council for any improvements. As Jack said, they will be able to say that they are doing a good job and their ideas are only suggestions.

We are all safe and sound and returning tomorrow. As in other years, there are a hundred stories or more. I just cherry pick. If possible, we will forward some of Pastor Susan Kent's pictures and writing after our return. I apologize for my technical inability to send pictures myself. Bless you all for your prayers, interest and incredible support, Cathy.

Friday, June 22: Backwards?

Often it is thought that impoverished people are backwards. Maybe instead they are "forwards". There is so much evidence we have seen this week of the country and city, with our close ally and supporter Mayor Marcio Rivas, have been progressing. In my early years of coming from 2004 on, there were heaps of trash along the Pan American Highway and the streets of Somoto. Plastic bottles were trashed, and when I asked children to pick up their trash after an art project, they looked at me like I was from another planet. Tourism at best in Somoto was from mission groups and the market was open air only, full of flies and littered. Roads even to villages four kilometers away were deeply rutted, with ruts sometimes feet deep, and heavy in mud. Gangs grew and 200 members terrorized neighborhoods of Somoto.

Now: Attractive trash cans line the street, streets are clean, as well as most of the highway. Recycling is country wide and this year trained anti-gang police went throughout the country, arresting the most aggressive of the members. The school we have can have night classes, where as last year, at night it was between warring gangs and we could not go. Marta told us it is now considered the safest of the Central American countries. Many remote villages still have muddy roads or paths, but those closer by increasingly have cobblestone lined roads to them, cutting travel to a fraction. The government has started a water collection program to help with the drought, collecting water that otherwise pours into the ocean with some damming, allowing it to seep into the soil and become part of the underground water system, as well forming a reservoir from which to irrigate crops. Where there were no parks, the mayor has put in a park with great play equipment for children. I will write more about tourism, farming and conservation efforts in a following email for those who are interested.

Blessings, Cathy.

Friday, June 22: A preschooler

It has been such a joy this week to see the 85 preschoolers currently enrolled in our preschool at the Children's project. There has been a wonderful change in their demeanor this year. Once running wildly about as the preschool continued to increase their skills with training and improve their staff, they are now much more calm and organized in their behavior...and they are the best students in public school after they graduate!



Here is one story...



Dinoa Jireh Lopez Aroca is four years old and has attended the school for over a year. Where does she live? In an 8 by 8 shack near the garbage dump, one of many shacks in the area. Her shack has plastic sheeting wrapped around the outside of limbs that form the supports, one side leaning and, according to her parents, in danger of collapsing. The tin roof, held down with rocks, has a space between it and the plastic exterior wall, which is lined with a light allowing material inside. They saved from their \$3 a day income little by little to buy the tin, sacrificing food, because they earn enough only to buy food, very little food. Stepping in, we immediately had to be careful to step around the the chicks and chickens flowing in and out on top of the uneven, dirt packed floor. Rain sometimes gets inside, even with a roof. There is a hand made single 'bed' with limbs holding it up, a mattress stuffed with ????, and a pillow. All three in this family, mother Nohenia and father Jose, sleep in this at night, using a mosquito net for protection. Proudly, they demonstrated its construction. Unlike some, they do not need to sleep on the dirt and rock floor. Their worldly possessions are tossed in three cardboard boxes by the back wall. Nohenia works as a domestic worker and Jose sells bread on the street with his bicycle. Dinoa smiles as she lifts a fluffy chick to her cheek, the smile the result of two meals

and a snack every day at the center. The mother explains that without the center, she either would not be able to work or would have to leave her young daughter home, in a dangerous situation. They attend classes at the center on how to teach good values and basic academics to Dinoia. Several times, they expressed their deep appreciation for a safe, healthy environment for their child and gratitude for Candida, who regularly visits the families, assessing their needs and showing love and concern for them. We thanked them for allowing us to visit and left their hut standing within a few feet of others to the chorus of three pigs oinking from the neighbors, the peeps of chicks, the crow of a rooster, and the gobbling protest of a turkey running free. The mud caked on our shoes, enough in which we could grow a garden, and we thought of the two kilometers they need to walk through this day after day to the school, and the two kilometers back. Bless all of you for the support you give the entire children's project. Blessings, Cathy.



Wednesday, June 22: Hot tin roof

We looked around. Every where we looked the tin roofs glistened, held down by rocks and heavy limbs over black plastic and stick shacks, roofs that existed where none had before. Last year, this area took second prize for the worst we had ever seen, behind only the sewer flowing river bank dwellers of a few years ago. This year, their tattered plastic had been replaced with new plastic...imagine a shack reconstruction like this! A boon to those inside. Although their floors are packed mud, they are much dryer when it rains now. Why? Because of generous donations that allowed us to leave money for the tin. Gracias!

And speaking of river bank dwellers, one sat beside me yesterday. Her daughter Ana receives a scholarship from someone who knows and loves her. The mother was pencil thin, her skin a dark brown leather hardened by years of survival in the elements. Thank you, thank you, she said, and thanks be to God for the house you built for us. I do not know where I would be living without it. (Unfortunately, we can guess.)

Bless you all, Cathy.

Tuesday, June 21: Scholarship

"Wow! What a beautiful painting", I exclaimed. Danielo stood before me, looking puzzled. He lives in a village about 10 kilometers from here and has been painting since he was nine. Art is his passion. He does not have money to go to the university to study graphic design, so he is selling paintings to try to get the \$100 a month it will cost him next year. During the days, he labors on a farm to support his family, being the only support his family has. The painting was quite large and he could sell it for only \$19. I asked him to paint 10 small ones for our fair trade fair. Two students from our student exchange ordered two more, including a graphic design student who admired it greatly. After I left, tears flowed down his face. He was shocked. Never in his life had anyone ever told him his art was good...and it is excellent!

He could teach art at our children's center if anyone would be willing to give him \$30 a month for a scholarship, helping him attend the university. Are you, or possibly anyone you know, interested in giving \$360 dollars a year for his scholarship? It would help assure his ability to raise what he needs.

I am so saddened by the many who cannot go to the university for lack of \$30 dollars a month. Blessings, Cathy.

Tuesday, June 21: Water: Do you have a drop to drink or a light to turn on?

Last night, hot and sticky, I was ready to get in the shower, not the Nicaraguan kind of shower the majority use with a bucket of water, but a shower out of a shower head. The water was off. Phooey. I recalled what Mayor Marcio had told us earlier in the day. There has been three years of drought in which the 75 surrounding villages have struggled to even get any drinking water. Imagine. Not enough water to even drink! Okay, so my problem was not so big, was it?

On Saturday four of the men in our group helped to distribute filters. With generous donations this year, 86 are being delivered to 86 households in several villages. The water will be clean, promoting health and ability to work.



Oh yes, the electricity here is going off frequently, sometimes on and off several times in one hour. It's a pain. Then I think of the many living here with no electricity, like the outlying area we saw a few days ago with plastic and stick shacks.

So, give thanks today for water to drink and all the electricity and great services we have. Blessings, Cathy.

Monday, June 20: Judging by the cover

Cross eyed, weather beaten, wearing clean but worn, mismatched clothing she stood before us. Her husband standing tall with a scraggly face and only a few teeth showing out of the hills of skin around his face, smiling, was next to her. What made her most happy was that she had recently married and now with a house could care for her 97 year old mother. I remember them well from two years ago, emerging from their igloo of trash that composed her home along with 15 others of all ages. We were there to bless their new home, one we started but did not finish last year. Who would have guessed. Out of her mouth and from deep in her heart poured the most beautiful of sermons of thanksgiving for her home, one she had prayed for for many years, but never believing she would receive. The interpreter said at the end that someone was going to pray now, meaning Pastor Susan with us, and she immediately raised her hands to God with a melodious prayer of thanksgiving pouring out to the heavens for many minutes. Who would have guessed that from her would pour out such beauty. Never judge a person by their cover. Blessings to all, Cathy.

Sunday, June 19: Tangential ministry

It happens every year. There are surprises. We were to build a house for seven orphans run by the oldest siblings. Guess what? The engineer said their land was not suitable for a house and they have to get another piece of land with a title. What now?

Three children, ages 2, 8, and 13 and their parents had been living with a grandmother for years. The grandmother bought a small parcel of land (land is VERY reasonable) on which to build a house because she knew that her family would be homeless once she died, since the mud brick



abode belonged to the other part of her family. She has been extremely distraught for all the years since because the family could not afford to build a house. Marta had been soliciting the mayor's office trying to get them one while the grandmother frequently wept. Nine days ago she died. Yes, you read it right, nine days ago, right at the time the engineer said the other house would not be possible. They will be the third house we build this year. Without us, they would remain homeless. We thought we were doing one thing but are doing another, and it will work out well, tangential ministry. Marta said she never dreamed it would be

the Nicaragua Project that would build for her family.

PS: We hope next year we will be able to build for the orphans. Blessings to all; thank you for your prayers, Cathy.

Sunday, June 19: Unbridled joy

There were hugs, smiles, and giggles all around. It took us until 5:30 p.m. to arrive from Managua and people had been waiting at the children center to greet us since 1:00 p.m. Immediately, with no complaints, people began smiling and hugging, and the children began their program. (Can you imagine this in the US? Waiting for four and a half hours and yet being joyful?)

The preschool tunnel we gave them last year became Noah's Ark and two by two, to the sound of music they emerged, some of the preschoolers from the children center, wearing masks made by the students from the student exchange we set up last year. Two by Two. Pairs. Vance talked last night about how they hugged and smiled without reservation, from their hearts. Children, adults. Grateful for our presence. We are paired with them as well. Hand in hand. Their gratitude and love meeting with our gratitude and love for them. As Dave said, he comes here each year to find joy.



They have so little? No, they have so much. What they have is in their hearts and spirit. May we seek the same. Blessings, Cathy.

Saturday, June 18: Some heartache/joy

Christian, I remember him so well many years ago sobbing along with his young sister Bethsayda after the recent death of their mother during child birth, a common occurrence here. We and the children center worked with him many years, helping him go to school, up to the beginning of this year. Living with ex-gang members, he has struggled. This year he is drinking a lot and hanging out with the tough men in the area instead of going to school. Please keep him in your prayers.

Bethsayda, is now a bundle of smiles! She was one of the beautiful traditional dancers in the troupe made up of scholarship recipients: Marcial, Pedro, Yessy, Ana, Karolina, Sinthya, and others. She now studies English at the children's center as well as dance and contributes many hours helping the little ones.

I cannot help but think about the parable about seeds: We scatter them. Some are taken over by weeds or fall where they cannot grow, while many fall on fertile soil. We continue to give thanks and praise to God that that is exactly where almost all have landed, on fertile soil. Blessings to all, Cathy.

Saturday, June 18: Ping pong diplomacy in Nicaragua

What? You may ask. Yes, ping pong diplomacy. Leaving Managua yesterday we drove to a large store that had one of what may be five tables available for sale in the city. Dave Twait, a board member who has come for six years has wanted the children's center we built to have a ping pong table. Playing ping pong is one of his passions and it is a great sport for a pass time for older children, keeping them engaged in the center and off the streets. Problem #1: We were in a minivan and going on to Somoto. There was only the floor model. However, they had one in a



box at their warehouse. We took a unique tour of Managua to the warehouse. Problem #2: How to carry it along with 14 fifty pound duffel bags, 10 people and their carry-on luggage in a minivan for four hours to Somoto. Solution #1: Put it in the back...but it would not fit. Solution #2: Put it in the middle seats...but it blocked the door by an inch or two. Solution #3: devised by our ping pong table engineer in our group, Mark Holste: remove the packing from the sides of the box. Voila! It worked. We packed in. Today Dave and our interpreter put it together and Candida, one of

our dear school directors, giggled and giggled playing her first game of ping pong. Dave can now teach the sport. We are proud of what is probably the only ping pong mission project in Nicaragua!

Oh yes, and by the way, we are all safe and sound and had a trip without a hitch. We were prayed through customs again as they distractedly searched four bags...the group behind us was not so lucky. Thank you for all the continuing prayers, Cathy..



Mission trips have been held for more than 10 years for the Nicaragua Project for building and repairing homes, medical facilities and children's centers; providing water filters for villages; providing scholarships for schools and universities; and providing medical supplies and treatment for people in Somoto, Nicaragua and the surrounding area. The Project is ongoing at Bethlehem with plans to continue support of the Mothers' Home, the Children's Center and school scholarships, in addition to continuing support for mission trips that provide supplies for schools and medical clinics, clothing, and a

Vacation Bible School. BLC has joined with other congregations in the area, [The Nicaragua Project](#), to provide funds, materials and participants for the trips. (For more information on Bethlehem's specific involvement, watch for the following links: About the Nicaragua Mission Project and information on BLC participation in past Nicaragua Mission Trips--coming soon). Our contacts at Bethlehem are [Cathy and John Goodman](#). More pictures from recent trips are posted in the [Nicaragua Missions slideshow](#).



2015 Nicaragua Entrefe Mission Trip

It is not possible to summarize the wonderful time we had in Nicaragua this summer, but here some of the things we were able to accomplish during the trip:

1. Financed 20 roofs to be put on deplorable shacks.
2. Provided funds for houses for three families and expansion of another to accommodate an extended family of 16. (Thank you house construction donors!) For the first time, we were able to dedicate a completed house for one of the three families.
3. Provided 50 water filters to 50 households.
4. Provided licenses for four graduates from the university in our scholarship program so that they can start their careers. They are our first graduates!
5. Provided 23 scholarships for youth who pay their scholarships forward by working at the Children's Center, many for many hours a week.

6. Funded the hiring of two additional teachers at our Children's Center for the 97 preschoolers.
7. Provided undesignated funds to the Children's Center so they can allocate the funds in the way they believe is best.
8. Paid for 10 dresses for the ballet folklórico at the Children's Center so that ten impoverished young women can receive dance lessons from a scholarship recipient. Lessons are not possible without a dress!
9. Three very impoverished families with a recent crisis were provided small packages of food to provide hope and temporary relief.
10. One suffering, elderly woman without a family was provided some financial aid.
11. Helped with transportation for an impoverished family whose mother has cancer.
12. Visited the clinic at the market that we funded last year to help the poor and loved what we saw.
13. Knitting lessons were provided for interested women by Pastor Susan Kent.
14. Pastor Susan Kent led Sunday worship and we gathered with old and new friends afterwards.
15. Jack Harris from Malone University in Ohio met with Mayor Márcio Rivas many times and decided to go ahead with a student exchange starting next June. This meeting also provided an opportunity for some of us to go see petroglyphs and an environmental preserve.
16. Many layettes made by Immanuel Lutheran in Greeley were taken to the Mother's house we built in Telpaneca and a few were left for the Somoto hospital.
17. We videotaped interviews with 75% of the scholarship recipients. (Some go to school in other cities and were unavailable.)
18. We had a wonderful last night celebration at the home of Marta's mother, and were given gifts of Somoto products by the mayor. We were thanked more times than we could count, and the past leaders who started the project—Pastor Abe Gonzalez and John Goodman—were remembered.
19. We had a joyous greeting and a goodbye ceremony at the Children's Center.
20. We were able to spend time visiting with the friends and people we have met through the years, something we have not had much time for in previous trips.