

Journal: VIM-Nicaragua Work-Study Mission Trip
January 16-25, 2009

U.S. Team Members: Diane Baltz, Jocelyn Baltz (Diane's daughter), Bruce Bredland, Ed DeLong, Lee DeLong (who provided "at home" support before and during the trip), Joyce Hill, Jennifer Lamb-Taylor, Ellen McDaniel, Jan Pennington, Rachel Taylor (Jennifer's daughter), Alan Williams, Doug Williams, Laura Williams (Doug's daughter), Shelly Williams Doug's daughter).

In Nicaragua: Nan McCurdy and Miguel Mairena, United Methodist Church (UMC) missionaries; Adrián Gallegos, translator.

Overview of Schedule:

Jan. 16	Travel to Managua
Jan. 17-18	Managua: study, visit historical sites, visit mission projects
Jan. 19-23	San Francisco Libre: work, study, visit mission projects
Jan. 24	Managua: visit mission project, artisan city, volcano, lake
Jan. 25	Return to Maryland

Friday, January 16, 2009 MARYLAND TO MANAGUA

Our team of 13 ("the lucky 13") gathered at Emmanuel United Methodist Church (EUMC) in Laurel, Maryland, at 10 AM. The temperature outside was 12 degrees. We were all wearing our Nicaragua-blue, United Methodist team T-shirts. A couple of team members were wearing sandals in anticipation of much warmer weather in Nicaragua. Rev. Stephanie Vader led us in prayer before we started on the first leg of our journey. Some of us felt: "How amazing that this is actually happening...after a full year of study and preparation and fund-raising. From dream to reality!"

A caravan of cars, loaded with suitcases full of the Spanish-language children's books and prenatal vitamins donated by our congregation, headed for BWI Airport. After giving our winter coats to Lee DeLong and passing through security at BWI, we ate a quick lunch. Then, Ed DeLong, the leader of our group, led us in Communion in the Delta Airlines waiting area. We each briefly shared our hopes and expectations for this journey. Many of us hoped to serve God by helping with a work project; to learn about a new country; to appreciate a culture different from our own; to take another step in our faith journey; and to create deeper and stronger ties between EUMC and Nan McCurdy, "our" missionary in Nicaragua.

The flights (to Atlanta and then from Atlanta to Managua) were uneventful. On the plane Ellen talked to a man from the U.S. who owns a factory in Nicaragua and brings a group of Rotarians down twice a year to build fences around rural schools. Why? To keep wandering farm animals off school grounds so that the kids won't get parasites from stepping barefoot in the animal feces.

We arrived in Nicaragua (a country about the size of the state of New York) at the ultra-modern, brand new airport in Managua at about 9 PM and sailed through immigration and customs. (Our group shirts helped.) Nan McCurdy, "our" missionary (i.e. she is supported in part by funds donated by our church), and her husband, Miguel Mairena (a lawyer, who is also a United Methodist missionary), were there to meet us with a modern 20+ seat air-conditioned bus. (We were really going to appreciate that air-conditioning in the days ahead.)

Our driver's name was Marvin, an excellent, safe driver with a lot of patience, flexibility, and knowledge of the city. This last proved to be very important because, in Nicaragua as is true in Costa Rica, there are no regular street names and house numbers. Directions are given in terms of existing (and sometimes long gone) landmarks and a certain number of blocks to the east, west, etc., of the landmark. (Example: three blocks south and two blocks east of the Old Cathedral, across from La Estrella restaurant.)

Our bus had a sign on the side which read: "This vehicle uses BIODIESEL. Our Biodiesel is made from Used Vegetable Oil which does not compete with food yielding crops. By using UVO, we prevent burned fats to be disposed of into water sources, as well as reducing air pollutants."

Marvin, with help from other airport personnel, put all the suitcases on the top of the bus and tied them securely. We waited for the bus to be loaded, some of us feeling a bit disoriented, enjoying a temperature in the upper 70s, a soft breeze, and starry skies. We turned our watches back one hour.

Nan gave us a basic orientation and overview of the week while we drove from the airport to the hotel. We passed tall, brightly-colored Christmas-tree type decorations in public places along the way. Nan pointed out that atop each tree was the lighted number "30" since 2009 is the thirtieth anniversary of the Sandinista revolution against the Somoza regime. (Earlier, during the Christmas season, each tree had been topped with a star). Many restaurants and hotels were still festooned with their Christmas decorations.

Our hotel, Casa San Juan, was located in a better section of the city, near one of the universities. The hotel roofline was dripping with white Christmas lights. Between the lights and the colorful tile, it looked very cheerful and welcoming. The rooms were air-conditioned and each had a small bathroom. The bathroom had a sink with cold running water and a shower with hot and cold water. The water was heated by an electrical heating device attached to the shower-head. (One member of our team learned the hard way not to touch the heating device while standing in the running shower.) We stayed 2, 3, or 4 to a room.

The hotel was clean, colorful, and serviceable. In addition to the bedrooms, there was a reception area with sofas in bright fabrics, a little room with Internet-connected computers, a small shop with gifts and cold sodas for sale, a roofed open-air dining room, and many tiled patios. (Google hotelcasasanjuan.net for lots of photos.) Energy-saving light bulbs were used in most areas of the hotel. Nan said that the water in Managua is heavily chlorinated and safe to drink, brush teeth, etc.

Exhausted, but excited to have arrived, we unpacked and hit the sack. Buenas noches, amigos.

Saturday, January 17, 2009

MANAGUA

Managua, a city of about 1,700,000 people (one-third of Nicaragua's population), has been inhabited since about 4,000 BC. Located on the southern shore of Lake Managua, it is Nicaragua's capital and largest city.

Managua has a tropical climate with temperatures ranging between 82 and 90, with December and January being, relatively speaking, the coolest months. Today was sunny, warm, and windy, with a temperature range of 69-90 degrees and fairly low humidity. The bougainvillea is blooming.

After our 8 AM breakfast of huevos revueltos (scrambled eggs), gallo pinto (a red beans and rice mixture), rolls with guava jelly, fresh OJ, and fresh pineapple, we boarded the bus, notebooks and pencils in hand. (Nan had strongly suggested that we take notes on each speaker's presentation.) We drove to the home of Sixto Ulloa, Ombudsman for Citizen Participation from the Procuraduria de Derechos Humanos, and met with him on his large open-air roofed patio. His wife graciously served us small wrapped packages of sandwich cookies along with coffee or Coke. Sr. Ulloa has worked for 40 years with religious groups in Nicaragua on human rights issues. His wife is a nurse and head of the nursing staff at Baptist Hospital in Managua.

While roosters crowed and trucks with loudspeakers passed by on the street outside, Sr. Ulloa explained the Nicaraguan political situation since 1990: the effects of the neo-liberal presidencies of V. Chamorro, Alemán, and Bolaños (all belonging to the right-wing political party, Partido Liberal Constitucionalista aka the PLN), and the changes that have been occurring since the 2007 re-election of Daniel Ortega, the current president and head of the Frente Sandinista de Liberación Nacional (aka the FSLN or “La Frente”) that is now in power. (“Neo-liberal” in Nicaragua has the opposite in meaning to the word “liberal” in the US. Neo-liberals favor business interests, privatization, free trade zones, CAFTA, free markets, deregulation or no regulation, a decrease in the power of the state, and allowing the profit motive to reign over other considerations.

Sr. Ulloa expressed hope that, with the Obama presidency, relations between the US and Nicaragua will change for the better. He said that two areas where Nicaragua is most in solidarity with the US are in the fight on terrorism and the war on drugs. He said that Nicaragua has been #1 in Latin America in capturing drugs and drug dealers en route from Colombia to the US and the government is rightly proud of this. He also stated that, since the 1980s, Nicaragua’s best US allies have been groups from churches and other NGOs which have chosen a position “against hunger and extreme poverty in favor of love and solidarity” [with the common people].

In response to a question, Sr. Ulloa suggested “Democracy Now”, “Tele- Sur”, and “Free Speech Radio News” as sources of unbiased reporting on events in Nicaragua. We can find information about these sources on the Internet.

After leaving Sr. Ulloa, we drove to a place where Nan and Miguel changed some of our dollars to córdobas. The current exchange rate is 20-to-1. As we drove, we saw the second tallest building in Nicaragua, the BAC Building. We passed by a modern mall with a Citi-Bank.

There are 5 major malls in Managua. These malls are patronized by families of Nicaraguans who are working in the US, Costa Rica, and other more wealthy countries and who send money back to support their families. Labor is the biggest Nicaraguan export. Although statistics vary, the average yearly per capita income in Nicaragua is between \$400 and \$500, with more than a few people living on less than \$1 per day. Nicaragua is generally considered the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. [According to NicaNet, in September 2008, the government raised the minimum wage, so now the minimum wage is between 30 cents (US) and 70 cents (US) per hour (depending on the job) for those who have “formal” employment. However, many jobs do not fall into that category. Source: NicaNet, 9/30/08.]

We heard about the ultra-rich Pellas family which owns the Flor de Caña Company (rum production) and other liquor companies. Nan also explained to us that although Nicaragua has the lowest crime rate (especially violent crime) of the Central American countries, razor wire abounds on top of walls, fences, and gates all over Managua to prevent theft and other petty crime. For the same reason, many doors and windows have metal bars, and some middle-class and wealthy neighborhoods hire 24-hour sentry services to monitor entry to neighborhood streets.

When we returned to the hotel, Nan and Miguel presented an overview of the history of US-Nicaraguan relations. Beginning in the early 1800s, the US government and various US citizens have interfered in Nicaragua many times, including (but not limited to)

- US citizen William Walker’s invasion and brief seizure of the Nicaraguan presidency, 1853-56 (Walker wanted to establish Nicaragua as a “slave state” for the US);
- Vanderbilt and others’ exploitation of natural resources such as teak and rare woods (for sailing yachts on the Chesapeake Bay among other uses), metals, and seafood;
- multiple Marine landings from 1853-1930 to “protect US economic interests” (fruit, mining, transportation);
- the forced exiling of a Nicaraguan president (Pres. Zalaya in 1909) because he wanted to build a canal across Nicaragua whereas US business interests wanted to build the canal in Panamá;

- continued support the increasingly corrupt Somoza regime because it was favorable to US business interests; and
- Ronald Reagan's stealthy support of a counter-revolutionary force ("the contras" of the Iran-Contra scandal) to fight the Sandinista government.

Nan commented that the solidarity of US churches against Reagan's policies helped to stop US government support of the Contras during the civil war (Sandinistas versus Contras) in Nicaragua during the 1980s.

Alan writes:

"[I] learned much about the impact of US policies on Nicaragua. What we hear and read in the US is one perspective and we know there are two sides to every story."

For lunch we went to BAR-ON, a small eatery which is owned by some artistic friends of Nan and Miguel. By this time it was getting hot, so we sat out on the open-air patio under a tin roof. (Air-conditioning is not widespread in Nicaragua despite the heat.) Lunch included chicken, rice, tostones (plantain rounds), and a salad of cabbage, cucumbers, and tomatoes.

At lunch, Nan talked about a wide range of topics to help prepare us for our upcoming experiences in Managua and in San Francisco Libre (SFL), the community in which we would live during the week ahead.

She started by telling us about "Christian Base Communities", small local worship communities that sprang up in urban and rural areas in Nicaragua after the Vatican II Catholic reforms. Nan also discussed "liberation theology" and its "preferential option for the poor", something our team had learned about during our preparation for the trip.

We learned from Nan that San Francisco Libre escaped the worst Contra violence during the Civil War in the 1980s. (The very worst violence took place in northern Nicaragua near the border with Honduras.) However, in SFL, every family was affected in some way by the Civil War because the men were in the army, and some were killed and others were physically or psychologically injured.

Nan told us about Hurricane Mitch's devastating effects on San Francisco Libre in 1998: how it poured rain for a solid week, how the waters of Lake Managua rose 9 feet, how the mayor and the citizens mobilized so that everyone was rescued and no one died, how many lakeside homes were destroyed by flooding from the lake, how the people of SFL were without clean water and electricity for a month, and how she enlisted United Methodist resources to get money and volunteers to build 400 new replacement homes on a hillside away from the water.

Nan explained how to use the United Methodist Greater Board of Global Ministries' (GBGM) program, "The Advance", to make donations for the programs in San Francisco Libre and other places in the world. Donations made through "The Advance" go 100% directly to the programs that serve people in need because Nan and Miguel's salaries are paid for by other church funding sources.

We got a real sense of how much good work the United Methodist Church is doing in missions, both here and worldwide, and how US church groups (especially UMC and Catholics) have helped make a positive difference here in Nicaragua. Previous to this trip many of us had no idea of the extent to which the United Methodist Church has been involved with the people of Nicaragua over the years, and we felt happy to be part of this Methodist tradition.

At 2 PM we went to Barrio 14 de Septiembre. (The barrio name refers to the date on which the US invader William Walker was finally defeated.) There we visited Rafael Valdez at the Comunidad Ecclesial de Base (a Christian Base Community). We met in a large room with a

small stage at the front. The stage was framed with white lace curtains. Hanging on the wall at the back of the stage was a banner of the Virgin Mary. At the front of the stage was a large Nativity set. The blue slatted folding chairs had been set in a circle around Sr. Valdez.

Sr. Valdez spoke to us about some of the most important things that the Ortega government is doing since it came to power in 2007.

- Increasing energy production and distribution is a top priority. Prior to 2007, there were frequent blackouts, up to 12 hours at a time, which wreaked havoc with businesses and home life.
- Decreasing energy costs (including subsidies to poor families) is another priority. The government is increasing development of renewable energy sources, the goal being to become totally free of petrol energy by 2012-13. (A geothermal energy plant already generates 10% of Nicaragua's electricity. A wind power project is about to start producing 40 megawatts a day, about 8% of the country's electrical needs.)
- An anti-hunger initiative is being implemented. This initiative includes providing small groups of poor women with low-interest loans for buying cows and pigs. (Never before have women received loans of this size.) In addition the Food for the People initiative addresses food shortages by having the government buy up basic foods (rice, corn, beans) to sell in small shops at a very low cost to help stabilize food prices.
- The government is encouraging the use of a "Citizen Power" direct democracy model instead of the "top-down model" (currently in use). This new "Citizen Power" model is considered necessary because money is getting too concentrated among a small group of people and because the number of very poor people who live in barrios with no potable water/sewer/paved streets is increasing. Under the "Citizen Power" model, municipal citizen-groups (e.g. women, farmers, youth, shopkeepers, etc.) will select a spokesperson to sit on a governing committee. The committee will decide what should be done with available resources, then communicate their decisions to the elected officials who will carry them out.

After Sr. Valdez was finished speaking, he introduced his daughter, Tatiana Valdez, who works in the field of medical administration, helping to acquire medical equipment and supplies for hospitals and clinics. She has a Masters of Divinity degree from McCormick Divinity School in Chicago. She also is the head of a small Christian Base Community (one of the first four CBCs here in Nicaragua). She led us through a Bible study similar to the ones she runs during the week and on Sundays. Many people cannot read and do not own Bibles, so most of the Bible Study is done orally. The Scripture is read aloud several times before discussion begins.

Srta. Valdez told us about two different models for Bible study. The first was "read, reflect, and translate into action". The second was "see-judge-act-evaluate your action-celebrate". We then read and reflected on Mark 8:1-10 (the story of the loaves and fishes). Sr. Valdez shared his beliefs that salvation is for here-and-now; that God's reign is also here-and-now, you do not have to wait until you die to be happy; that there is a need to improve life now; and that making sure there is enough food for all people is a spiritual action.

Barrio 14 de Septiembre is the neighborhood in which the youth Baseball Academy is located. The Academy (also one of Nan and Miguel's mission projects) provides baseball training and baseball leagues for impoverished children ages 8 to 16. We had hoped to see a game, but the season was already over. One of the Academy teams had advanced to the national finals. We later learned that the team had finished third in the country.

We left Barrio 14 de Septiembre and took the bus to Barrio Jose Dolores Estrada (named after a national hero famed for helping defeat William Walker's army). As we were driving through the various barrios, Nan told us about some special national (non-religious) holidays in Nicaragua including:

- July 19 (the anniversary of the Revolution to overthrow the Somoza government)

- September 14 (the defeat of William Walker)
- September 15 (the anniversary of Nicaragua's independence from Spain)

The September 15 holiday seems most analogous to the US Fourth of July celebration.

In Barrio Jose Dolores Estrada, we were welcomed to the home of labor organizer Gladys Manzanares. Sra. Manzanares is the mother of 6 married children and the grandmother of 11, all of whom live together in her house. She organizes workers in the manufacturing firms located in Nicaragua's "duty-free" industrial parks (Free Trade Zones aka FTZ aka "zonas francas").

In her front patio, under an almond tree, with family laundry hanging on the line in the background and roosters crowing, Sra. Manzanares shared her life story and experiences as a union organizer. Since 1990 she has worked in the FTZ and organized workers in a factory there, rising to the position of Labor Ombudswoman. She trains workers (usually young women in poorly-paid unskilled production jobs) in the law and their rights as workers; combats harassment, sexual and physical abuse of women in the workplace; works to improve hygiene systems and safety systems (such basic things as providing hairnets/masks/earplugs and moving machines far enough apart to prevent accidents) in the FTZ factories; negotiates to alleviate harsh rules, regulations, and policies; and advocates for increased salaries and respectful treatment. (The workers' basic salary is currently about \$90-100/month.) She told some appalling stories of how workers are abused and demeaned (all the while working in dreadful conditions for extremely low wages).

Rachel writes:

"The first day in Nicaragua, we made our rounds throughout the city of Managua meeting with different people, to hear their "story". A person that will always stick with me was Gladys, a 60 year old labor union leader, who worked in sweatshops to support her growing family. Gladys invited all 14 of us into her home, to share her story. We sat on her "porch", which consisted of a dirt floor, a few plastic lawn chairs, rocks and different types of livestock roaming around. At first I was a bit shocked, and nervous by the living conditions (this was the first real "taste" we had gotten of poverty in Nicaragua) but after a few minutes of listening to Gladys, I felt completely comfortable, and almost at home. Gladys told us stories of her fight for rights in sweatshops, protests she attended, and what she has done to make life better for her and her family. Gladys was feisty, and she had the most optimistic attitude, which I admired greatly. To see such strength, in a situation where it could have been so easy to give up, moved me. I will always remember Gladys, as well as the many other people I met throughout my trip to Nicaragua. It is important that we as a church support our missionaries Nan and Miguel so that people like Gladys can continue to tell their story."

Joyce writes:

"Gladys Manzanares gave us an account of what went on in the factories. Apparently conditions are somewhat better now, but it still leaves a lot to be desired. Factories were made very cheaply; owners did not pay electricity bills, and conditions were appalling.

"Workers had to put up with harassment, verbal, physical, and sexual abuse, and were given no respect. None of the workers could speak unless spoken to. Bosses would pull women's hair and ears, the women had to ask permission to go to the bathroom and often the boss would not let them go. They could not have time off when sick. Pregnant women would get hassled and had to put up with it or had to leave. If they could stick it throughout their pregnancy, they would get three months maternity leave. The bosses wanted the women to quit so they wouldn't have to pay them during maternity leave. However, most of these young women could not afford to lose their jobs so they stayed and put up with the abuse.

"Many young women worked 7 days a week, from 7AM to 10PM each day,

with a half hour for lunch and one 10 minute afternoon break. Each room would be filled to capacity. There was no air conditioning. Open windows allowed the stale air in the workrooms and narrow halls to circulate and even let in a fresh breeze every once in a while. Working conditions could lead to carpal tunnel or respiratory problems.

"Hearing about the conditions, this bothered me enormously. We have all heard these stories in the States, but hearing it told from someone who had experienced it was horrifying as to how they were treated. No one should have to go through these conditions. This is slave labor. How can we help these people have a normal life?"

Alan writes:

"Quite a day.... [T]he impact of the Free-Trade zones was stunning in terms of impact on the workers. I was encouraged by the work and commitment of Gladys [Manzanares] for the work she has done for the workers of Nicaragua who are mostly young females."

In 2008, the FTZ system employed about 87,500 people. Since the election of Daniel Ortega in 2007, the government has ordered the factories to allow the creation of unions, to raise wages by 50%, and to improve working conditions (for example, eliminating forced overtime). Ironically, even though the increased wages still leave Nicaraguan workers as the lowest paid in Central America, several firms have moved their operations to Asia because labor is cheaper there. [Source: NicaNet, 11/4/08.]

On the way back to the hotel, as the bus stopped at an intersection, we saw 4-5 year olds darting through traffic to try and wash car windows to earn money. They jumped in front of the bus in an attempt to clean its windows.

Diane writes:

"One memory that [stays with] me was the behavior of the kids in the intersections of the highway in Managua. It was jarring and somewhat shocking when we first saw kids as young as 4 or 5 standing in the street trying to sell things for money. They were selling water in plastic bags with straws and bottles of Pepsi (the only cola company in the city), honey, handmade crafts, sunglasses or they tried to wash windshields for tips. Now, I've seen men in DC doing the same - especially trying to wash windows - but to see really young boys standing in traffic was awful....But this is a common occurrence in Managua."

Upon arrival at the hotel, a few of us went to the small Internet room to send emails to our families. After dinner (rice, refried beans, tortillas, mashed potatoes, pan fried sea bass with cream sauce and lime quarters, chocolate cake), we met on one of the courtyard patios in the cool (upper 70s) of the evening for our first devotions together. (Occasionally we encountered mosquitoes around sunset. Generally though, there were very few mosquitoes on this trip because it was the dry season.)

Each evening's devotions were led by Ed, with hymn singing led by Ellen. Prior to the trip, team members had been asked to send in the name of a favorite hymn. Each night we started our devotions by singing a couple of hymns, and then one of the favorite hymns was used as the focus of the devotions. Tonight the hymn was Ellen's selection, "Be Thou My Vision".

Ed asked us each to choose a word to describe our impressions of today's experiences. The words included: eye-opening, inspiring, challenging (especially seeing children living in poverty), graciousness (of the people who invited us in and shared with us), illuminating, mind-boggling, education (the importance of it and appreciation for our own education here in the USA), melody (of Nan's instant translations of our speakers' thoughts), eloquent, sympathy (especially with what women have had to go through and are still going through here), action (the people we talked to were all people of action), "taking for granted" (all the things we in Howard County USA take for granted).

Thank you, Lord, for this day. Bless all those we met today who are doing Your work.

Sunday, January 18, 2009 MANAGUA

Sunny, breezy 69-low 90s. Breakfast: same as yesterday but with a platter of fresh cut watermelon, mango, cantaloupe, and banana.

Our team gathered at 8 AM for breakfast, and at 9:30 we boarded the bus to go to church. There was a major bicycle race going on in the vicinity of the church. We had to park on one side of the highway, run across between the bicyclists, and walk along the other side of the highway until we reached the unpaved, dusty, impoverished neighborhood, Barrio Carlos Marx, where the small Methodist Evangelical church was located. We were warmly welcomed by the pastor and by the many neighborhood children who attend Sunday School there. (Most of the children participate in the church's weekday free lunch program.) The worship room was set up with blue wooden folding chairs and the ubiquitous plastic chairs that are used everywhere in Nicaragua. There was a plain wooden lectern at the front of the room and a large whiteboard at the side. There was no adornment of any sort on the white walls. After the pastor welcomed us, Ed spoke words of unity and thanks on behalf of our group. Nan did simultaneous translating.

The congregation is very small and the church service focused on issues relating to church growth. After remarks from two pastors, the congregation was invited to join in discussion. Several members spoke on such topics as the "megachurch" versus the small "cell church" and on ways in which to promote church growth. Jennifer remarked on how church growth is a concern in the USA too. Ellen spoke in Spanish about how important it is to keep Jesus as our role model when we talk about church growth.

Alan writes:

"[The s]truggles of this congregation [are] similar to our own in terms of how to grow and expand ministries. I shared a small thought in Spanish - "Nosotros es uno en Cristo" - we are one in Christ."

A special moment came when, during the hymn singing led by the pastor with a guitar, he started to sing "Santo, Santo, Santo", one of the hymns we had practiced (in Spanish) during our 12 month preparation. So we were able to sing along. After the service some of us chatted with adults while others enjoyed interacting with the children who had been attending Sunday School in an adjacent room. Doug led a rousing game of "Follow the Leader". The children were extremely friendly (especially a little boy with Downs Syndrome) and there was much shaking of hands all around.

After church, Nan and Miguel took us to the newest mall in Managua for lunch. With the sound of Latin rhythms in the background, we ate at the food court where there was a *Subway* along with many local fast-food restaurants. Some team members ordered Nicaraguan fast food such as roasted flattened chicken breast and sweetened, fried whole platanos. Others tried the delicious locally-made ice cream for dessert.

Alan writes:

"Nan gave us each 100 córdobas [\$5 US] to buy lunch. Local foods as well as international - like *Subway* and *Quizno's* were represented. I had a combo: número cinco (#5) chicken (pollo) tacos. It was good and for 80 córdobas it included te (tea) de limon."

We are getting to know Nan (especially) and Miguel better. Nan is highly intelligent, very organized, passionate about her work, well-spoken, knowledgeable, dedicated, compassionate, and straight-forward. She is an excellent teacher and motivational speaker. She is a FSLN supporter as were many (but not all) of the people we talked to during the week. Miguel, who is

Nicaraguan, is also highly intelligent, calm, level-headed, thoughtful, with a good sense of humor and a positive outlook, obviously highly committed to serving God and his nation. Nan and Miguel make a very strong team together.

On the way back to the hotel we passed a large sign in English advertising a deluxe resort community in San Juan del Sur on the Pacific Coast. Although we did not have time to visit the Pacific Coast, we have heard from many sources that the beaches are very beautiful.

After lunch, we gathered in the shade on the patio in front of the hotel, to hear about the experiences of Father Dennis Hebert, Catholic priest and a Canadian by birth. Fr. Dennis spent 40 years in Peru and other Latin American countries, acquiring facility in the Spanish language along the way. In 1968 he attended the Latin American Bishops' Conference in Medellin, Colombia, where he was inspired by discussions about "a situation of injustice that can be called institutionalized violence" [Source: excerpt from final document of the LABC, 1968]. This led Fr. Dennis to spend the rest of his life dedicated to "breaking down structures that put brakes on people."

Fr. Dennis came to Nicaragua during the presidency of Violeta Chamorro. He considers the Nicaraguan people to be people "great faith" who are "open", "welcoming", "friendly", and very family-oriented. He said that the people are "taking responsibility for pulling themselves up by their bootstraps, but there are many internal arguments."

Fr. Dennis believes that in Nicaragua, the churches "need to try to build morale based on spiritual power since all have lived under dictatorship for so many years" that their spirits have been "crushed". Although Fr. Dennis acknowledged that President Ortega has made some improvements, he said that in the past the country's rulers have "institutionalized rules to their own benefit" and therefore the people have "no power, no voice, no right to claim anything." Nonetheless, he said, "We must not lose courage, we must carry on."

Fr. Dennis said that one strength of Latin American countries is that they are "blessed with lay and Christian martyrs" who have been killed due to their "commitment to making conditions better for the people." He thinks that "Latin America is full of minor prophets" and that "God is and has been working through some unusual people" here. At the end of his presentation, Fr. Dennis led the team in a discussion of examples of Latin American and US institutionalized violence. Both he and Nan recommended a book for further reading: Pedagogy of the Oppressed by Paolo Freire.

Jan writes:

"After spending what felt like a full day in and around Managua, our team met with Father Dennis, a Catholic Priest, originally from Canada, who began his career in Lima, Peru in 1969. Having been in Nicaragua since the 1990's, Father Dennis reflected on 'institutional oppression' and challenged our team to identify ways the Nicaraguan and US governments have oppressed their people. With remarkable honesty, Father Dennis acknowledged how the Catholic Church has played a part in the worldwide 'oppression' of women by limiting their leadership roles. When asked if he believed that there would ever be a Latin American pope, he thoughtfully replied, 'Not in my lifetime.' The sight of an elderly priest in a wheelchair touched me with his honest, frank response and the air of sadness he portrayed as we all remembered that we are all confined to reality and the spirit of the times, even as agents of change."

Following our meeting with Fr. Dennis, we drove to the former downtown area of Managua, an area which is largely empty of homes and businesses following the destruction from a 6.2 earthquake of 1972, the epicenter of which was directly under Managua. More than 5,000 people were killed, another 20,000 were injured, and about 50,000 homes were destroyed, leaving about

250,000 homeless. [Source: Wikipedia] Because of the damage, a large area in downtown Managua was never rebuilt.

We passed by the tallest building in Nicaragua (the former Intercontinental Hotel, one of the few downtown buildings not destroyed by the 1972 earthquake) and we also saw a “tent city” of former banana laborers whose health was destroyed because of the use (by US multinational corporations) of known poisonous pesticides, including Nemagon, on banana plantations during the 1970s. (Nemagon was banned in the US in 1967.) This tent “city”, filled with people stricken by cancer, migraines, sterility, miscarriages, nervous disorders, hematomas, blindness, hair loss, liver damage, and other ills due to the use of pesticides, stretched for a couple of city blocks. Many of the “tents” were made with black plastic garbage bags. Hundreds cancer deaths of Nicaraguans have been attributed to the use of Nemagon. Nicaraguan court decisions have levied millions of dollars of fines against the US multinationals, but the corporations have refused to pay. [Sources: NicaNet, Wikipedia]

After passing the tent “city”, we visited the Plaza de la Revolución. The blue and white Nicaraguan flag floated in the breeze. Around the edge of the huge Plaza are many places of historic and current interest.

- Lighted by an eternal flame, the tomb of Comandante Carlos Fonseca (founder of the FSLN) is located in a park at the edge of the plaza.
- Across the plaza stands Catedral de Santiago, a beautiful Catholic cathedral, too damaged by the earthquake to continue in use.
- The orange-colored former Presidential Palace was built in 1989 during a SLC presidency. When President Ortega took office in 2007, he decided that this edifice was too palatial, turned it into government offices, and renamed it “La Casa De Los Pueblos” (The House of the People). The building is surrounded by a green fence. A statue of national hero Augusto Sandino stands on a white pedestal at the side of the building.
- The impressive National Palace of Culture was built in 1935 and was one of the few downtown buildings to survive the 1972 earthquake. Inside are the National Archive, the National Library, and the National Museum.

In the National Museum we saw pre-Columbian statues; an exhibit of ancient metates (stone devices for grinding corn); an exhibit on El Güegüense (a famous colonial-era satirical folkloric drama/dance featuring masked and costumed performers); an exhibit of contemporary ceramics; and some notable paintings: Omar de León's *Crucifixión*, a portrait of Rubén Darío (the most famous of Nicaragua's poets), and a picture of the defeat of William Walker (the hated US invader).

Ellen writes:

“As a person who is very interested in art, I was delighted to be able to visit, albeit briefly, the National Palace of Culture (Palacio Nacional de la Cultura). I believe that the art of a national speaks of the nation and that it's an important perspective to have in understanding a culture.”

On the front of the National Palace of Culture are two huge banners. One banner has a picture of national hero Augusto Sandino and says, “Sandino, we are accomplishing [your goals] and fulfilling [your ideals]...” The other banner has a picture of Carlos Fonseca Amador, founder of the FSLN political party, and says, “Carlos, we are carrying out the Revolution.” Both banners are “signed” by President Daniel Ortega.

After leaving the Plaza de la Revolución, we continued our drive through the former downtown area past the malecón (a wide strip of walkway along the lakeshore) where people were walking and jogging, past a small amusement park (filled with rickety-looking rides), and through a large open square where goats were contentedly grazing.

All over the city we saw large billboards featuring El Presidente Ortega. (People here refer to their president by his first name, "Daniel", pronounced as "Dah-nee-el" accent on the "el".) On one bright pink billboard, a smiling waving President Ortega proclaims, "United, Nicaragua triumphs. Citizen Power." On a second billboard, also bright pink, a more serious President Ortega stands with his right arm raised, fist-clenched in a power salute. The billboard reads, "Rise up, poor of the world. More democracy, more power."

The bus took us up to the top of a very high hill in the Tiscapa Lagoon Natural Reserve. Once the site of the Somoza presidential mansion, only a small part of it remains. Underneath this site is the prison where current President Ortega and many other political prisoners were tortured during the Somoza regime. Dominating the top of the hill is a 59 foot statue of the silhouette of national hero, General Augusto Sandino (wearing his famous broad-brimmed hat). From our vantage point on top of the hill we could look out over much of the city of Managua and also the Tiscapa Lagoon (which has a zip line attraction).

While we were at the reserve, we visited a small but very interesting exhibit on the life of General Augusto Sandino, who led a rebellion against the US military presence which was in Nicaragua at the end of the 1920s. His anti-imperialism made him a national and Latin American hero. In this exhibit large banners presented Sandino's famous sayings. One banner says, "We are moving toward the sun of liberty or toward death; and if we die, our cause will continue to live. Others will follow us."

Next we drove through another impoverished barrio to the bright blue building that houses one of Nan and Miguel's projects, Prescholar Los Caracolitos (The Little Snails Preschool). Los Caracolitos is a Headstart-type preschool for the children (ages 3-7) of the poorest of Managua's inner city citizens. We heard from the director, the teachers, and the parents of the children. La Directora (the director) lives at the school, arises at 4 AM to clean and to cook food for the children's breakfast and lunch.

There are two sessions, 8-11 AM and 12:30-3:30 PM. La Directora and the teachers are currently completing their own high school educations by taking classes on Saturdays and studying Sundays and evenings, in addition to their full time teaching jobs. One of the teachers moved us greatly in speaking about her love for the children, the school, and her teaching career. Completing her remarks, she said, "I will die a teacher".

Several mothers spoke gratefully of the support the school has given to them and their children. The women work full time at jobs taking in laundry or ironing, cleaning houses, selling cosmetics out of their homes, repairing clothes, selling coffee and bread at the nearby Eastern Market. Jennifer happily held the newborn baby of one of the young mothers during our conversations with them. We donated many of the Spanish-language children's books to Los Caracolitos. The staff was delighted to receive the books. Apparently it is difficult and expensive for the average person to obtain books in Nicaragua.

Nan writes:

"In addition to the preschool program, there is an accelerated primary education [which offers] first-second in one year, etc., for older children and teenagers who were not previously able to finish primary school. The children get their education, a hot lunch, and some medical care."

During our trip, after every Nicaraguan speaker was finished, Ellen would stand and offer thanks in Spanish, saying: "De parte de nuestro grupo nos gustaría agradecerle(s) por compartir con

nosotros su tiempo, sus conocimientos, y sus perspectivas. Que Dios le(s) bendiga en su trabajo.” (“On behalf of our entire group, we would like to thank you for sharing your time, your knowledge/understanding/wisdom, and your perspectives with us. God bless you in your work.”) At Nan’s request, Ellen also wrote thank-you notes in Spanish which Nan gave to each speaker along with an honorarium.

Night falls quickly at around 6 PM every day because Nicaragua is so close to the equator, so we returned to the hotel for a dinner of fried chicken, rice, thick potato fries, cooked mixed vegetables, and fresh juice. After dinner, we started devotions with singing hymns, then used Diane and Jocelyn’s favorite hymn, “We Are the Church”, as the center of the devotions.

The team shared many different answers to the devotional question, “What did you think about when you heard the words of today’s hymn?” We thought about

- Los Caracolitos, how it took courage for the mothers to share with us, of connecting emotionally mother-to-mother, of the teacher who said “I am going to die a teacher”, of meeting children’s needs in a loving, caring environment;
- a child jumping and smiling even in the midst of the dreadful conditions in the banana workers tent “city”;
- singing “Santo, Santo, Santo” together in Spanish with the congregation in church today;
- the little boy at church who shook everyone’s hands and gave hugs;
- how the local church was very receptive to the children, and how children are the future of the church in every country.

Monday, January 19, 2009 SAN FRANCISCO LIBRE

After a breakfast of fresh fruit and pancakes, our Nicaraguan translator, Adrian Gallegos, joined us. Up until that time, Nan had been doing all the translating. (She was able to do simultaneous translation from Spanish to English!) Adrian would be staying with us for our five days in San Francisco Libre.

We left Managua for San Francisco Libre at rush hour. The many speed bumps in the road kept traffic moving slowly. Men selling “agua pura” (clean water) in small plastic baggies roamed through the traffic. We saw people sitting jammed in the back of open pick-up trucks, horse-drawn and mule-drawn vehicles. Many old US school buses have acquired a second life as regular buses in Nicaragua. Often they are decorated with bright colors and floral designs. We stopped at an ultra clean modern gas station to get gas.

On the way out of town we passed the Free Trade Zone where 20,000-30,000 people (mostly young women) work daily. It was a busy, crowded area. (These FTZs, located in several places in Nicaragua, employ more than 60,000 people.)

The country of Nicaragua is composed of 15 departments (and 2 autonomous regions) which are similar to our states. Each one is composed of municipalities which are similar to our counties. There are a total of 152 municipalities in the country.

San Francisco Libre Municipality is one of the 10 municipalities in the Department of Managua. SFL Municipality is composed of 33 villages. It has a total population of about 12,000. San Francisco Libre (SFL) is also the name of the town where we were staying. The town of SFL is located within SFL Municipality and is the capital (similar to our county seat) of SFL Municipality.

The trip to SFL takes about 2-2 ½ hours, with only about 1/3 of the distance on paved roads. The remainder was on rutted dirt roads, covered by small stones and pebbles. The road is fixed once a year after the rainy season. In September and October (and also during hurricanes) torrential rains turn the road to mud, making travel extremely difficult. Right now it is the dry season and clouds of dust followed every vehicle traveling through the countryside.

As we traveled through the flat dry scrub desert on our way to SFL, Miguel pointed out some of the natural vegetation: the poroporo tree with its bright yellow flowers, the jicaros gourd tree, the malinche tree covered with pods (bright red flowers would bloom later), and the marango tree with droopy white flowers. Small patches of green highlighted the little streams that punctuated the endless stretches of tan, brown fields. Miles of barbed wire fences lined the sides of the dusty road. Miguel told us that the barbed wire is produced by a Nicaraguan company in Masaya. Along the road, men on horseback carried loads of hay or firewood.

As we drove along, Nan told described the origins of the “Women and Community Association” (W&C). W&C is an ecumenical women’s organization dedicated to the empowerment of women, to community-based integral health care, and to community development. It began in the early 1990s as a response to then-President Violeta Chamorro’s social program cut-backs. Some early programs of W&C were health education, literacy, and nutrition, and production of natural medicines.

Programs at W&C now include

- economic programs including Cows in Women’s Hands, a Women’s Feed Grinding Coop, and production of natural medicines and cereals;
- programs dealing with human rights and prevention of violence against women and children;
- health programs such as the Women’s Health Clinic and the Child Nutrition Program; and
- the Youth Scholarship Program that allows low-income youth, especially those of single mothers, to complete their high school and post-high school study.

Although Nan and Miguel are involved with many programs in and around Managua (including Little Snails Preschool and the September 14 Little League Baseball Academy), Nan said that she would most like our support for W&C and its programs in San Francisco Libre.

We made three stops on the way to SFL, one in a tiny community to pick up W&C agronomist Luz Marina Zamora. Some of us needed to use a latrine nearby, which, unfortunately, was inhabited by wasps that were not exactly delighted to see us. As someone said, “Going into that latrine took me out of my comfort zone.”

Our second stop was in the community of Pacora where Doug had worked on a two room schoolhouse a few years ago on his first trip to SFL. The school in Pacora serves about 80 young children.

Doug writes:

[In January 2005] Baldwin Memorial UMC invited EUMC to go to Nicaragua.... BMUMC sent \$5,000 to replace an old wooden school house (it looked like a shed) with a new block and steel 2 room school. Our 8 person team painted it inside and out.”

Our third stop was in the community of Los Madronitos, where we visited another one of Nan and Miguel’s projects, Cows in Women’s Hands. We met three women who have been successfully involved in this project since its inception. We sat in the shade on an open porch in one of the women’s homes which had a little flower and vegetable garden in the front of an adjoining shed. A mini-parrot called a chocoyo lived under her eaves and Adrián coaxed it down to sit on his hand.

The pilot project for “Cows in Women’s Hands” was begun in 2005 with 7 women. Each woman was loaned enough money at zero interest to buy a female cow. The brand and title of the cow

are in the woman's name. Each woman has since paid back the loans and has received new credit to buy more cows. The women rent land from family members; their goal is to eventually buy land of their own with money received from economic activity relating to the cows, such as the sale of milk and cheese and the sale of male calves. Of course, the cows also provide milk and cheese for the women and their families.

The three women were very enthusiastic about the results of the project. Bertha started with one cow and now has three more. She said (via our translator), "I feel very happy." She has kept all the female calves and sold the males to buy necessities. Leonore started with one cow and had 2 male calves. She has bought a second pregnant female cow and hopes for a female calf. She said, happily, "Now I am the owner of cows, not the husband." She trades milk and cheese for eggs from other women in the community. She is also part of a cooperative that makes natural shampoos and high-protein cereals. Dolores started with one cow and now has 3 female cows. She said, "What a great cow! You can't imagine how happy I am to have a cow because it's mine....Now I have some economic power."

All three women and their daughters have participated in W&C workshops including "Prevention of Violence Against Women" and have found them helpful in talking together about these issues. They feel that W&C workshops have helped to change their sons' attitudes too. The attitudes of the adult men in the community are changing, but more slowly. W&C staff members have been teaching anti-violence programs in the local high school as well as at the W&C Center.

Thirty-three women have gone through training in cattle-raising techniques and have received a loan. Another 14 women are in training this year. The cost for training and for a loan to get a cow totals \$500 per woman. (A cow at the right age to begin reproduction costs \$300. Nine training sessions with the agronomist cost \$200.)

Alan writes:

"On our way [to SFL], we stopped to visit three women who received no-interest loans to buy cows. They sell the milk to pay-off the loans. Also the cows get pregnant and the calves are either sold (if male) or kept to make more milk and cheese. They use a pill to separate the curds from the whey. The curds are patted together with salt to preserve the cheese. One of the women present had 5 cows and two of them were pregnant."

Finally we arrived in the town of San Francisco Libre. In the hillside neighborhood of Lomas del Sol, we were welcomed by our host families on the porch of Jennifer and Diane's family. We enjoyed cool refreshments of fresh fruit salad and drinks. All the homes of our host families were located within 2 blocks of each other. (Go to Google, click on the maps section, and type in "San Francisco Libre, Nicaragua" for satellite imagery of the community.)

Diane writes:

"We arrived in SFL and drove up to our part of the town called - Lomas del Sol - Sunny Hills. We were staying in the homes built 10 years ago by the UMCOR funds after Hurricane Mitch. The homes may have been new but they didn't look it. Our homes were situated along one long dirt road. Each casa was made of cinderblock and metal sheeting. Homes were separated by crude rock walls, metal wire and metal sheeting. Many homes had a small front porch or yard to sit outside (which most people did because the homes were so warm inside).

"Sunny Hills is a good name because the hot sun shone all day. It was bone dry and extremely dusty....And what we noticed right away was that there was trash all over the place. Plastic bottles, bags, paper, shoes, etc. all over. And we smelled...smoke all the time: some was from the homes cooking their food, but the awful toxic smell was from the trash fires that people set to get rid of some of their trash. They would pile up their trash (plastic bottles, spoons, toilet paper, wrapping from food bags, shoes) and burn it....

"Our first stop in town was to gather with the whole group at the home that was to be my casa....the mama of the house, had prepared a fruit salad for the group. We gathered on her covered concrete porch and had plastic cups filled with her fruit salad. I remember someone looking at me as she got ready to take a bite and she said, 'Here we go....' The cup was mostly filled with juice with small bits of fruit. I imagine it was not inexpensive to prepare fruit salad for 15+ people."

The homes we stayed in were the ones built with UMCOR (United Methodist Committee on Relief) money/volunteers after Hurricane Mitch in 1998. They were designed by Miguel to withstand earthquakes. At that time they were built, with community agreement, all 400 homes were put in the names of the women in order to protect the interests of the children in each family because there are many common-law marriages in Nicaragua.

The homes are about 48 square meters (about 23 by 23 feet), made of cinderblocks with concrete floors and metal roofs. Typically there are two bedrooms, separated by curtains from the main living area. Hammocks are a commonplace sight. The homes have outside showers and latrines. There is no sewage system. Waste water from washing, bathing, and cooking flows onto the ground at the back of the house or is used to water things in the yard. Most yards are fenced. Some people own a pig. Many people own chickens. Many people have dogs. All these animals wander around the property.

In the town of SFL the homes have electricity and chlorinated cold running tap water. Under the Ortega government, electricity is available 24/7. (Under the previous government there were rolling blackouts of up to 12 hours a day.) Water is currently available for about 12 hours a day.

However, it is different out in the countryside of SFL. According to Nan, "[In Nicaragua] there are poor families everywhere, but it does seem that the most impoverished tend to live in the more remote areas. Some have electricity, few have running water. They might get water from a local well with some kind of pump. But few places in the countryside outside of the main towns would have a tap. There is an effort to extend the electrical grid and provide running water. Little by little. There are remote places in the country where people get water directly from a river, creek or lake. Most people in the countryside have latrines."

All the families we stayed with in SFL were "middle-class" in the Nicaraguan context. Some signs of this might be ownership of a TV/VCR, a refrigerator, possibly a motorbike (el moto). Some people have built roofed additions to their homes (often enclosed kitchens at the side of the house) and/or have added concrete porches along the front. Most people do not have upholstered chairs or sofas, but rather multiple plastic chairs with arms. People with a little more money might have some cane-backed rocking chairs. Most rooms have simple overhead lighting (bare bulbs) of the energy saving variety.

Although the homes in the town of SFL have chlorinated, cold running water, there is no hot water. Since water is available for only 12 hours a day, people fill huge barrels with water in order to have clean water available in their homes for the other 12 hours. If the water is off when you want to shower, you scoop water from barrels kept in the shower for that purpose. Luckily, since the weather in SFL is always hot, the water in the shower barrels is lukewarm.

There is trash everywhere, especially plastic trash. There is no trash collection system in SFL. The animals eat the food trash. People burn other kinds of trash. The plastic trash collects everywhere, although the yards of individual homes are kept clean of trash. Solid waste disposal is a huge environmental problem for Nicaragua.

Jocelyn writes:

"My family had 3 kids, 2 boys, and a girl. The girl's name was Yazmina, and she introduced me to a girl named Daniela and her sister Angelica. These girls, along with the

daughter in my mom's family, Yuricsa, were the ones who I clung to in order to have a little bit of social contact in San Francisco Libre; they were so much more welcoming than I thought anyone could be to a total stranger. So in between attempting to talk to them, the rest of the group and I met a variety of other kids doing things to improve their communities."

Ellen writes:

The family that Joyce and I stayed with consisted of 5 people: a mama and papa, their 6 year old son, and the mother's two adult-age sisters. The sisters are 3 of eight children in their family of origin. Their other sister and four brothers live with their mother in a community about 20 kilometers away.

At the front of their house they have added a small one-room store (la pulperia) and a room containing an electric-powered corn grinding mill (el molino). The mama runs the mill. She and one sister run the pulperia. The other sister works as an accountant for the municipality. The papa goes to Managua by bus once a week to buy items to sell in the pulperia and takes care of all the finances for the pulperia. He also works for the municipal government as the person in charge of distributing government subsidized foods (corn, rice, beans) to the many small stores all over the municipality.

Every few blocks in SFL there is a small store (la pulperia). The pulperia owned by Joyce and Ellen's family sells small items such as shampoo, soap, candy, breads and rolls (some locally made), batteries, cold sodas, deodorant, hair color, Alka-Seltzer, hot sauce, shoe polish, glue, playing cards, toothpaste, fresh hot peppers, disposable razors, fresh eggs, chips, sanitary pads, Tang, light bulbs, among other things. It is open from 4 AM until 8 PM everyday except Sunday when it is open only in the afternoon.

This particular pulperia also sells government subsidized corn which is ground (in the electric-powered corn grinding mill) into moist dough for the local women so that they can make tortillas and other baked goods, such as rosquillas (ring shaped cookies), perereque (a dessert), ojaldras (flat cookies), or empanadas. Many women in the community arise at 4 AM to prepare food, to wash and iron, and to feed their husbands before they go to work. So the corn mill starts operating at 4 AM.

There are 4 daily buses to Managua. The first leaves at 5 a.m. full of workers and also university students, all of whom make the 2-2 ½ hour (one-way) trip daily. You can only imagine how difficult (or impossible) this trip becomes in the rainy season when the dirt road turns to mud, and how such conditions affect job stability and educational plans.

Most of the women in SFL wear mid-length skirts, long pants, or jeans. Tops are short-sleeved, sometimes sleeveless. The men wear slacks or jeans with T-shirts or short-sleeved, light-weight button front shirts. Children tend to wear shorts and T-shirts or short-sleeved shirts. For footwear people wears sandals, sneakers, flip-flops, "jelly" shoes, flats, or light-weight leather.

After we unpacked some of our belongings, we took the bus up the hill to the Women and Community Association Center. There we met the W&C staff members, introduced ourselves, presented the staff with the remainder of the Spanish-language children's books, and shared a lunch (red beans and rice, a piece of pan fried chicken, lightly cooked squash with cheese). Pepsi and water were the drink choices for every meal. (There were also big containers of "pure" water available for us at the Center and in the neighborhood at Bruce's host family's home.)

After lunch the team split into 2 work crews, one to work on the playgrounds, one to paint the interior of the Center. Joyce, Ellen, Alan, and Bruce were assigned to the Center (from time to time joined by a few other team members); the others worked on the playgrounds. Adrian was translator for the playground crew; Ellen was the translator for the Center crew.

Nan and Miguel said their goodbyes (until Friday) and went back with our bus to Managua where they had much other work to do. Then the playground crew walked down the hill to begin work on the first playground. The Center crew began preparing the rooms in the W&C Center for painting (taking down the Nicaragua map, the large whiteboard, several pictures, and the rolled bamboo window coverings, dusting walls and molding, scraping walls, and pre-painting stained wall areas).

Alan writes:

“Got to work Monday afternoon. There is a large meeting room in the Women and Community Building at the top of the hill. We painted one full wall and one-half of the other that afternoon.”

Each day the playground crew worked in the hot Nicaraguan sun, cleaning up trash from the heavily-used community playgrounds and painting the playground equipment (slides, swing sets, see-saws, and jungle gyms). They used oil-based paints in primary colors. The crew was joined daily by a multitude of children who were on vacation from school and who wanted to help with the painting.

Diane writes:

“Our group gathered the paints from the local storage shed on the hill to the W&C center. We kept some of our supplies in Ed & Alan's house. Work started early before the heat became unbearable. As the days went on we tried to begin even earlier in the morning (7am). Each member of our team took a brush and a color and started painting the equipment.

“I think the kids in town generally visited with each other and talked or played on the playgrounds. Some of the kids had tiendas [small shops] in their homes and worked there when they were not in school. [However, since school was not in session because it was vacation,] the local children quickly came to the work site and wanted to join in the painting. We allowed the kids to paint because they are the ones who will be using it after all.

“At the beginning of the week, we didn't really have a plan and just gave out brushes and paint. We found that this became fairly chaotic and the kids were getting paint on themselves (it doesn't wash off). So as the week went on, Doug realized that he would give each child 15 minutes to paint and then they would pass their brush on to someone else. And by the last day, Doug figured out that they could help out even more; he had them clean up the trash from the playground before they were allowed a turn to paint.

“Those who were painting really had to make sure to drink water because the heat was so strong that we became dehydrated fast. We didn't have a lot of shade either. So we kept drinking and resting, but by 10:30/11:00 we were done. It felt so nice to get to the W&C center and feel the breeze from the top of the hill.

“Personally, I remember feeling anxious about being surrounded by the children and not being able to communicate. I could ask them their names and that's about it. But after the first day, I tried out more Spanish vocabulary and either got a smile, a blank stare, or a response in Spanish that I couldn't understand. And there were so many kids that I couldn't remember most of their names. Jennifer was great at remembering the names. Shelly and Laura [were] too. I think all of us experienced...anxiety that first day or two but as we continued to live among them that week, our anxiety diminished and maybe the locals' anxiety did, too.”

Each day the Center crew was joined by the W&C staff and several teens, painting offices and storerooms in the W&C Center using latex-based paint. Each staff member was able to choose the colors for her office. Cream (crema), violet (lila), and peach (salmón) were favored. The

main meeting room was painted Wedgwood blue and cream. The storage room was painted cream.

Although the early mornings were fairly cool, by 11 a.m. the intense Nicaraguan sun really started to heat things up. The playground crew decided to begin their work a little earlier in the morning to take advantage of the cooler temperatures.

Out of the direct sun inside a building, the Center crew did not have as grueling working conditions as the playground crew; and since the Center is located on a hill, there was almost always at least a bit of a breeze. Sometimes playground crew members came up the hill to take a break in the Center, to get out of the sun for a bit, to have some extra water, and to help with the interior painting.

A few words about the Women & Community Center: originally it had been designed as a tourist motel/hotel, but the contractors were unable to complete the project. At some point the building was given as payment (in lieu of money owed) to the W&C Association. It is in a beautiful location at the top of a hill, overlooking Volcán Momotombo and Volcán Momotombito (aka Little Momotombo), a small island volcano in the middle of Lake Managua which stretches out before you into the distance.

The Center enjoys a nice breeze. However, in order to reach the Center, you have to climb a steep, unpaved stony path (quicker route) or walk along a stony dirt road (takes longer). Either way, it was a tricky route at night. We had to use flashlights because there were no streetlights. Several team members slid and sustained minor leg abrasions when descending the steep path after dinner and devotions at the Center.

The Women & Community Center is a long, brick-red, rectangular building. Inside is a large un-airconditioned meeting room flanked by several offices with window air conditioners. The Center is surrounded by a chain-link fence, has bars on all the windows, and has heavy wooden doors. It has 2 bathrooms with sinks (cold water only) and flush toilets. There is a covered concrete porch along the back wall of the Center where we snatched a few moments of rest from time to time. We shared devotions there after dinner each night and watched the sun set behind the perfectly conical Volcán Momotombo, an absolutely beautiful sight. (Volcán Momotombo is an active volcano. Its last major eruption was in 1905. At Momotombo's base there is a geothermal electric plant which generates 10% of Nicaragua's electricity.)

At one end of the Center, under roof but open to the air, was a large sink where the dishes were washed with cold water after each meal. We re-used the same plastic forks, ceramic plates, and glasses at each meal. The dishes were air dried on a table. Since we ate lunch and dinner together at the Center every day, Nan had hired 2 women to cook the meals: one woman cooked the lunches, the other cooked the dinners. We ate breakfast with our host families before reporting for work at our worksites.

The meals were served cafeteria style, with the cook loading each person's plate according to what they wanted. The choices always included rice, red beans, cooked plantains, corn tortillas, and a small amount of meat, stew or scrambled eggs. Occasionally there would be a small serving of fresh salsa or fresh vegetables. Since it was the dry season, very few fresh fruits and vegetables were available locally, except plantains. At one meal there were slices of tomato, cucumbers, and onion and we considered this to be a real treat.

We ate together with W&C staff and teens, sitting around a "table" created by pushing several smaller tables into a long rectangle. The tables were covered with yellow and white tablecloths. Baskets of bright blue, purple, orange, and pink flowers made of dried cornhusks served as centerpieces. After eating, we scraped the leftover food onto the ground for the skinny dogs which wandered everywhere.

Energy-saving light bulbs were used just about everywhere we went in Nicaragua and the Center was no exception.

At 6:30, we gathered for dinner at the Center, following which we congregated on the porch for devotions. The good people of our congregation back in Maryland had written each of us a note of encouragement and thanks. Ed had brought this "mail" along for us and distributed a "letter" to each person. Many a tear was shed as the thoughtful and cheering sentiments were read. (Thank you to each person who wrote a note...your kindness was very much appreciated!)

Alan's favorite hymn, "A Mighty Fortress Is Our God", was used as the center of our devotions. We talked about how we saw and/or heard God's grace today. God's grace was found in many different places...

- in connecting with a new Nicaraguan friend through sharing a love of music;
- in the words of today's hymn that give strength during difficult moments in life;
- in the image of the dust left behind us during our trip to SFL and the clear air of the path ahead;
- in the thought that God will provide;
- in the welcoming gift of fruit salad provided by our hosts when we arrived; and
- in this particular team of people who have joined together to come to Nicaragua.

Tuesday, January 20, 2009 SAN FRANCISCO LIBRE INAUGURATION DAY

The day began for some of us with the sound of fireworks at 5:30 a.m. It was Inauguration Day, both in the US (the inauguration of President Barack Obama) and in SFL (the inauguration of newly-elected mayor or "alcalde" José Angel Velásquez).

Alan writes:

"Breakfast - up at 6:40am or so. Rooster, pigs, buses, and vegetable cart all broke the morning silence. Breakfast was rice and beans, egg, fried cheese, tortilla, and excellent coffee."

A typical day for team members in SFL:

- Wake up anytime between 4 a.m. and 6:30 a.m. depending on the noise level (sounds of pigs, chickens, the electric corn mill grinding, hosts preparing for their day, children playing outside). Nicaragua is so close to the equator that the sun comes up at about 6 AM every day.
- Breakfast served by our host families. (Breakfast usually featured rice, red beans, corn tortillas, plantains, coffee, maybe scrambled eggs, maybe fruit or juice, maybe salty cheese.) Walk to worksite between 7-8 a.m.
- Work at Center or on the playgrounds.
- Walk to the Center for lunch at 12:30.
- From 12:30 until 5:30 p.m., learn about and visit mission projects in SFL and/or meet with local community leaders, project professionals, teens active in the community projects and/or learn about the local community. Sometimes meetings were held in the Center; other times we walked a mile or so to a different location.
- 5:30 Time with hosts. Freshen up or shower.
- Walk to the Center for dinner at 6:30.
- Group devotions.
- Walk from the Center, down the hill, back to our host families. Since there were no street lights and little light spilling from the houses, you could see the stars (including a very discernible Milky Way) in their abundance and brilliance, something that is not possible in urban and suburban settings in the US.
- Lights out between 9:15-11 p.m., depending on the family's schedule.

Ellen writes:

Since the mamá at our house had to get up at 4 a.m. to work in her store, our lights were almost always out by 9:15. Once all the lights were out (there was no nightlight left on) and the doors were locked and bolted, it was pitch black in our bedroom. You literally could not see the hand in front of your face. There was no ambient light from outside the house unless it was a clear moonlit night.

On this special Inauguration Day, breakfast as usual with our host families was followed by a shorter-than-usual work session.

Alan writes (of the Center Team):

"[We] fully painted the large room today. Mixed paint for the wall ends; came out as a Wedgwood blue/green."

Laura writes:

"[Today], we worked in the morning and completed the painting of playground two before 11:00 AM, Nica time. We then walked as a group through the small "urban center" of San Francisco Libre to a modest home [which] who had cable television and an indoor kitchen – both things that I rarely saw anywhere else in the town.

"In the town, all the houses were small – they're about the size of my parents' kitchen and living room combined. More than three people generally lived in each home with the occasional "addition" of a dirt floor room. Our team gathered in this modest home. The way it compared to other homes, it could have been the Mayor's home. They even had a small two-person car, which were relatively unseen in the town."

This home was the nicest one that we visited in SFL. The floor was brick-red stone tile. The kitchen, painted brick red to match the tiles, featured decorative white stone tile on and around the sink and food preparation areas. There was a metal sink, not the usual concrete sink. There was "agua pura" available in the kitchen. The living room walls were painted white, not just bare cinderblock. There were pictures and other wall decorations. The family had electric fans to help move the air around. Not only were there comfortable padded arm chairs, and cane backed rocking chairs, but there were two sofas.

Prior to arriving in SFL, we had hoped that it could be arranged for us to either listen to or see on TV the inauguration of President Obama. But we did not know if it would be possible. Very happily for us, there was one home (described above) in all of SFL that had a satellite dish, the first satellite dish in the area. Also very happily for us, the owners graciously opened their home to us (14 total strangers) at 10:45 a.m. so that we could see the inauguration, on CNN, in English. We didn't learn the family's name. We give grateful and heartfelt thanks to this kind family!

Joyce writes:

"What a joy it was and how extremely lucky we were to be watching the inauguration far away from Washington in someone's humble abode in Nicaragua. The people had been so kind to let fourteen of us in their home. The night before we didn't even know if we would be able to even watch TV, this would have been a great disappointment to all. However, a house was found that fortunately had satellite TV. (This house seemed a little above most with lots of chairs; therefore we were able to view TV in comfort.)

"How did I feel to be watching the inauguration? Excited, enthused, and thrilled particularly when we never expected to see our president inaugurated. One could feel the energy in the room as we were all so glued to TV. We raved and cheered. It was such a proud moment, watching history being made, and a great feeling to be an American even though we were far from home."

Ellen writes:

“It’s hard to find words to describe the experience of watching the inauguration (in Nicaragua!). The excited, energetic crowds on the Mall in Washington (dressed in heavy winter clothes while we were dripping in the 92 degree heat)...the beautiful music being played (“Simple Gifts” is one of Joyce’s favorite pieces)...the swearing in of Barack Obama (and the memories it brought back for those of us who were involved in the Civil Rights movement)... the happiness and elation of those who worked for and/or supported Obama’s election...President Obama’s serious speech to the nation...George Bush exiting by helicopter...tears ran down many faces for many different reasons...it was a very emotional moment, one that we will never forget...”

Laura writes:

“As someone who volunteers for the Savage Volunteer Fire Company [in Maryland], I had a lot of friends who volunteered to provide EMS care in DC for the Inauguration. They were stressed, busy, and could not enjoy the experience. I felt entirely blessed to be in Nicaragua during that time....

“We had plenty of room to gather around [the] small television just in time to see Biden take his oath of office. We got to watch everything after that until Mr. Bush and his family boarded Marine 1 – I forget its special name when the president is not onboard – and we all praised where our country is going, hopeful for the future.

“It was overwhelming to see all the emotions of all the people packed into DC. I can remember it like it was yesterday, as I write this a month later for our team journal. During the trip, we were so busy and then I was too exhausted to find much ability to write and reflect. In my twenty-two years, there are only two other historical events in my life where I knew exactly where I was: September 11, 2001 and November 4, 2008. September 11, 2001 found me in my 9th grade math class at Atholton High when the Principal announced what happened – a year and a half later, I became an EMT/firefighter to serve my own community. November 4, 2008 found me at home, cuddling with my dogs, listening late at night to the news, waiting for the word. As soon as it came in, I cried tears of joy and relief and fell immediately to sleep. It was quite late; I’m not a typical college gal. There are so many out there who have seen more historically and I feel blessed to have experienced that little bit in my life.

“Remembering this trip to Nicaragua and seeing our impact on their lives will forever stay with me. I know people who say we shouldn’t give our money to other nations when there are so many social and financial problems in our own country. However, these are people, from what I have seen, who don’t give or serve in their own nation – they ultimately leave it to someone else (or even the government). Serving is not only a part of living a Godly life, it is a social responsibility. That social responsibility begins in our hometown and extends all around the world, across nations and cultures. I am excited to be called to other parts of the world – whether its 3,000 miles away in another country or 150 miles away in Cumberland [Maryland], working at Camp Hope. It fulfills my life and I hope I am able to make others more happy and hopeful in their own lives.

“What are you being called to do?”

We returned to the W&C Center for lunch and for the start of many presentations about W&C’s programs and projects. Our first speaker was Arbelia Conde, Director of W&C’s Youth and Children Projects and also of the Nutrition Program. The Nutrition Program serves children under 5 years of age in 32 communities in SFL Municipality. (Of the 250 children served, 150 have nutritional growth problems.) The children receive soy cereal, anti-parasite medicine, and special vitamins. Two doctors visit the communities on a rotating basis to provide check-ups for the children. In each community there is a person designated to keep track of the children’s weight. The program also provides education for parents to help them prepare more

healthy foods, to promote the using of “greens” in their diet, and to encourage parents to raise chickens.

Sra. Conde then introduced a young man, Helder José Garcia. Helder was wearing a T-shirt that said, “Somos defensoras de DDHH” (“We are defenders of human rights.) Three years ago, Helder started a network of “Teens Against Family Violence” in SFL Municipality. There are currently 20 teens in the group (half young women, half young men) from villages all over SFL. Each youth works with a group of about 10 others in his/her home village. Helder and another youth have been given training in human rights and what the national legal policies are in terms of family violence. The group has produced 20 radio spots on topics such as human rights education, sexual and reproductive rights, and the right to live without violence. The group is trying to change machismo behavior among men.

In 2007 Helder and another youth attended a large Central American Conference on AIDS in Managua. In 2008 Helder, W&C staff, and representatives of the anti-violence youth network met with the candidates running for mayor and council members of SFL. (In Nicaragua the voting age is 16 and many young people vote.)The youth network had taken a survey of 700 teens to find out their priorities. The survey asked teens to identify their main needs. The results were: jobs, education (including access to higher education), and a better road that could be used during the rainy season.

Nan writes:

“In May [2008] the students organized their own agenda of priorities for youth. They ended up with a long list and then did a poll with kids in their villages. After polling over a hundred teenagers hosted the candidates for mayor and for council member to present the list and get written commitments by the candidates. It was a great process... and both candidates committed to 90% of the youth priorities. We facilitated the same process with women and also had great results. The youth and the women learned what can be accomplished when you organize. “

Helder’s dream is to set up a community radio station to educate the local populace, especially other teenagers, on the issues listed above. The initial cost for this project is about \$10,000. Helder would also like to have his own youth network TV program because most of the current “TV broadcast programs are bad for kids”.

After Helder’s presentation, we walked about a mile or so through the hot and dusty countryside to another W&C project, the Women’s Clinic, located on the main street of “downtown” SFL. The streets in this area are paved with small hexagonal cement paving blocks called adoquines. The adoquines are set by hand.

We passed many gray cinderblock homes. A few homes were whitewashed or painted in an apparently popular pink and turquoise combination. Among the small shops scattered here and there along the street was a house selling “San Pancho” organic honey from a countryside cooperative. (Later in the week, several team members returned and bought jars of honey to bring home to the US.) Some houses were flying flags of the two main political parties, and political candidates’ names were stenciled on the exterior walls of the homes. We saw motos (motorcycles), small cars, open taxis, bikes, and an ox-drawn cart loaded with firewood (to be sold as cooking fuel for open kitchens).

On the covered, white-tiled patio of the Women’s Clinic, with trucks and buses going by on the main street in the background, Maura Delgadillo, a nurse and W&C staff professional, spoke with us about the work of the Clinic which operates in conjunction with the national Ministry of Health.

Joyce writes:

"The Women's Health Clinic serves 32 communities and about 10,000 people. (This is the facility where we took the Prenatal Vitamins collected at our church and donated them to the Clinic's pharmacy. The nurses were so enthused to see the vitamins since they had depleted their stock six weeks earlier.) Maura Delgadillo, nurse and W&C staff member, met us on the patio The Clinic employs one part-time ob-gyn doctor, one nurse, and 20 local midwives who serve about 2,000 women a year. Most babies are born at home and the midwives go out to far-flung rural areas to provide health care services. [The midwives have been trained to recognize the signs of problem pregnancies and in such cases encourage women to spend their ninth month in Managua to be near a hospital.]

"Women using the Clinic services are not charged for treatment, medication, or vitamins. They are given gyn exams and pap smears, and are treated for common female health conditions and pregnancy. [Since the Clinic opened in 2000, more than 2,500 women have been given cervical cancer screenings.] Unfortunately, mammograms are not routine, so only when a lump is discovered will women report to the Clinic. Women can receive one month and three month injections to prevent pregnancies; they can also procure the morning after pills. (Strict laws against abortion are in effect, and doctors performing abortions can be severely penalized.)

"At present there are 100 pregnant teenagers (ages 14-17) in San Francisco Libre. Usually the young mothers keep their babies. If adoption is necessary, it is usually arranged with immediate family members. The birth rate is slowly dropping due to Clinic programs that provide better information on women's health and family planning.

"Since there is a shortage of doctors and modern medical facilities in San Francisco Libre, all operations and treatment for serious medical conditions have to be performed in Managua, which is fifty miles away. (This requires a three hour journey by bus; the women do not go singly but travel in a group together for safety's sake. Many women do not have the money to travel.)

"The Women's Health Clinic is one of the important projects supported by the Women and Community Association. One serious need is a full-time doctor (cost: about \$6,000/year)."

Nan writes:

"This year our women's clinic was able to make various favorable agreements with the government health center....The center provides 4 out of 5 basic medicines for free (that is the average that they have in stock) and more poor people are able to get free exams and surgery in government hospitals in Managua. This is good news for people's lives and well-being.

"The first agreement we made with the health center was for them to share an OB/GYN with the Women's Clinic two days a week. In exchange we are helping them with some of the transportation expenses to send doctors to the farthest corners of the county once a week. We also send our nurse who accompanies the OB/GYN. Thus women are being attended by a woman doctor in town and in remote areas. We are also having the pap exams analyzed in Managua for cervical cancer and some illnesses. This has been quite successful and because of years of promoting pap exams in SFL for the women, we now rarely see full-blown cases of cervical cancer....

"We are just beginning work with pregnant teenagers and teenagers who have given birth in the last two years. We will meet with the girls to facilitate a reflection on their situation and to increase their self-esteem. The girls are some of the poorest in SFL and with little formal education. We suspect that a high percentage have experienced violence in their families and/or with their boyfriends. Over the next few years we will reflect with them on

gender formation, gender equity, different aspects of violence, human rights like reproductive rights and sexual rights. One objective of these reflections will be to prevent more pregnancies until they are older....

“Most women in the countryside give birth at home and are attended by midwives. Maternal mortality is high in countries like Nicaragua in part because high-risk births take place at home....

“Before the clinic opened, women came to the Women and Community Association looking for help to have sterilization procedures. Since February 2000, more than 350 women have been able to have this done at a clinic in Managua. We accompany them and pay for the procedure and medications. These women are extremely poor and struggle to save money in advance for bus fares and food. The association has begun reproductive-responsibility workshops with men. Men are encouraged to use condoms and have vasectomies, a cheap, low-risk operation.

“It currently costs about \$15,000 a year to keep the Women's Health Clinic going.... Most women in San Francisco Libre are extremely impoverished; they pay a small, symbolic amount for their health consult of \$2. For this amount they see the doctor, get cancer screening and any kind of basic treatment they need. If they have abnormal cells, the Association usually pays for the procedure in Managua to remove the cells. Once a week the doctor and nurse also make visits to remote areas to provide health care to the women there. Their greatest additional need now is more money for contraceptives. “

After talking with Sra. Delgadillo, we visited Marcia Saldana, head of the Clinic Pharmacy. She was very happy to receive the prenatal vitamins and condoms that we had brought. The prenatal vitamins are dispensed to the poorest pregnant women. She showed us the small pharmacy (with sparsely filled shelves) and said that most medicines are donated from abroad. A doctor's prescription is needed for most medicines. The real shortage of drugs occurs during the September and October rainy season, the time of respiratory infections. This season also brings dengue fever and leptospirosis. The major health problem that Sra. Saldana sees is kidney infection due to the water quality.

Alan writes:

“I have been in a number of pharmacies in the US and I was struck by the overall lack of product on the shelves [here]. However, I was glad to see the vitamins that we brought with us were already stacked ready to be dispensed. Also the pharmacy served as a copy center for the community.”

Next we talked to the Clinic doctor, Dra. Rosa Silva, an OB-GYN, in her “calming pink” office. (Her office was one of the few places in SFL which was air-conditioned.) Dra. Silva comes to the Women's Health Clinic twice a week.

Jan writes:

[Dra. Silva] “was trained in Cuba and spent 13 years there. She sees more than 30 people a day....Most of the patients are pregnant women/girls, but she does treat couples [who have] sexually transmitted diseases and general problems for those with no money. She is paid in part by the Ministerio of Health and in part by Women & Community. She makes house calls as needed, especially if she knows of abnormalities or special situations. The needs of the Clinic include training for specialized testing (for example cytopathology) [so that they can do the tests locally rather than] send them off to Managua.”

After talking with Drs. Silva, we held our devotions on the Clinic patio. We would not have time for devotions after dinner that night because there was going to be a fiesta celebrating the new

mayor's inauguration. The focus hymn was Ed's favorite, "This Is My Song". Everyone agreed that it was a very appropriate song for the joint Inauguration Day, here and in the US.

Ed writes:

"Georgia Harkness' hymn poem, "This Is My Song," became a guide to my world view early in my teen years. She wrote the words in 1939 at the onset of WWII. Her words keep my world view from becoming parochial at moments of crisis. Her thoughts force me to think more broadly and more deeply about people who at first appeared to be quite different from me. These words awaken me to realize that the dreams and hopes of most individuals regardless of skin color, nationality, religious practices, language or gender are, in most instances, not all that different than mine. It reminds me to listen for the common themes that run through the different forms of life expressions and see God's grace."

Every afternoon at about 4:30 or 5, a breeze would come up off the lake and things would start to cool down a bit, dropping from the lower 90s to the mid 80s. Today was no exception. After leaving the Clinic, we walked to the lakefront area. This was where all the terrible flooding had taken place during Hurricane Mitch. Now all that was left was a quiet, marshy lakeside area. Unfortunately, Lake Managua is heavily polluted, although plans are underway to clean it up. The mayor of SFL hopes that a new dock will be built at the lakeshore so that tourists and others can come to SFL by boat. We passed a family of pigs, with Mama Pig feeding 6 little piglets. One little piglet did a funny "dance" while rubbing his hindquarters on a tree.

After freshening up, the team met back up at the W&C Center as usual. Tonight's meal featured the tastiest of all the red beans we have been served, rice, baked platanos, and scrambled eggs with green pepper. We did not linger over dinner because we were scheduled to attend the fiesta.

We walked about a mile and a half to a park in "downtown" SFL where there was a DJ playing Latin rhythms. Under strobe lights, young people were dancing. A few non-teens joined in from time to time, including Joyce (who danced with Adrian) and Doug. Since it had been a day full of many intense experiences, we left after about a half hour to head back to our host families and to get some sleep

Wednesday, January 21, 2009

SAN FRANCISCO LIBRE

Ellen writes:

"Breakfast today included scrambled eggs (from our family's own chickens) laced with bits of fried mortadela, a kind of bologna made of chicken that tasted like bacon. It was tasty. After breakfast today I shared some fotos of my husband, children, and grandchildren with my host family. We talked about families in Spanish. A couple of other times at breakfast we watched a Nicaraguan TV channel together.

"While I was in SFL, the only English-speaking media I encountered was the Inauguration broadcast on CNN. There were almost no references to the US among the Nicaraguans we met in SFL or on the Nicaraguan TV station that Joyce and I occasionally watched with our family at breakfast. (What little local TV I did see was mostly a litany of disasters and violence taken from the sensationalist media of the world, with the US heavily represented. Oh, yes, and there was video coverage of Chief Justice John Roberts re-administering the oath of office to President Obama.)"

Alan writes:

"At our home [in SFL], Juan [the father] worked as a night watchman. He would leave after eating dinner around 7pm and not return until 7am the next morning. He took this job when his prior work as a steer slaughter ceased due to lack of supply and demand. The coffee we had in the morning was

delicious and very smooth. It was a great way to start the day. Besides rice and beans for breakfast, we had eggs, or the white salty cheese and some tortillas. Gretal, who was 18, was going away to University in March. She is going to stay with relatives in Managua while attending school. [The younger daughter], who was 9, enjoyed her musical CDs and DVDs as well as drawing. Ed and I both received a flower drawing from Maria Fernanda as a going away remembrance of our visit.”

During the morning, the Center crew continued painting offices. The colors of the day were again lila and salmón. Adán and Manuel joined the Center crew and W&C staff in painting, so the work went very quickly. At the playground, Doug (with Adrian’s help) organized the kids to help pick up the trash before starting to paint. The girls helped out immediately; but some of the older boys were more reluctant to help until the girls were the first to get paint brushes because they had helped.

Lunch was fried beef with onion, rice, red beans, tortillas, and a few slices of fresh vegetables. Joyce passed around some Oreos she had brought along on the trip for dessert.

After lunch Gloria Mayorga, who is the Center staff person in charge of the Scholarship Program and who has worked at the Center for 10 years, spoke to us about the program. Currently there are 95 students (from 25 communities in SFL) receiving scholarships (13 for fifth and sixth graders, 70 for highschoolers, 3 for university students, 9 for technical studies students which includes elementary teacher training). Most families, especially those in outlying areas of the municipality, do not have the resources to send their children to school past the elementary grades. Although education is free, children have to furnish their own materials, transportation, uniforms, and lunch, plus the costs of their own transportation. There is no school bus service. In most of the outlying communities education is not available past the elementary level, and students must pay for transportation to the nearest high school in order to continue their education.

Scholarships are given to students from the poorest homes, many of which are headed by a single mother.

Nan writes:

“Our [scholarship] program gives priority to girls since historically families made more of an effort to educate boys than girls. We have about 65% girls and 35% boys. We also prioritize youth in outlying villages – it is much harder for them to study high school and beyond because of their location. And we prioritize children where there is no father present. Most of these kids suffer some kind of violence by at least one parent; at least 30% have seen violence against their mothers by her partner or ex-partner, and approximately half of the families are headed only by the mother....

“The high school students do some kind of community service each year. This year they are tutoring grade school children who are having problems in their village. Gloria Mayorga, the staff person who coordinates this program, also visits the students who have received poor grades or not completed a class, to talk with them and their families. The student and family then sign a contract to meet with our psychologist....

“Every month [Sra. Mayorga] facilitates training workshops with the high school, technical and university students. This year they have reflected on environmental health, their reproductive system[...], the concept of health – both physical and emotional; sexuality in children and adolescents; sexually transmitted illnesses and a special workshop on AIDS.”

The parents of the scholarship students receive training every 2 months, learning how to have a healthy relationship with their children and also about HIV/AIDS, pregnancy, child protection laws, and women’s rights laws. (The scholarship students receive similar training.)

W&C coordinates with the schools where students are studying in order to monitor progress. They also coordinate with the Mayor's office regarding the selection of students in an attempt to identify who has the greatest need. This year (2009) there are no new scholarships available due to lack of additional funds, although there are 80 additional requests for scholarships. Funds are currently coming from Methodist churches in the US, German NGOS, the Global Fund for Children, and other outside sources.

A donation of \$150 supports a grade school child for the year. \$200 supports a high school student for one school year, mostly to pay for transportation costs to and from the nearest high school. \$600 supports a university or technical studies student for the year. Ninety-eight percent of children in SFL complete primary school, but a far smaller percentage finish high school. (When you remember that the average salary in Nicaragua is about \$500/year, you realize how difficult it would be for students from poorer families to advance their education beyond grade school.)

The Nicaraguan government funds one free public university. There are 10 public universities (but only one free university). There are also 38 private universities. Public universities are considered better than private universities in Nicaragua.

Three W&C scholarship students came to speak with us: Rebecca, Manuel, and Adán. Rebecca is 17 and comes from SFL. Her mom is a single mom; she has one brother. She thanks W&C for 6 years of scholarship help and has finished high school. She would like to go further in her education, but there are currently no funds available. She would have to study in Managua and pay for registration, copies of books, tuition, transportation, and food, but her family has no resources. She would like to be a social worker because "As W&C helped me, I can help other ones."

Manuel is 17 and in his last year in high school. He is one of four children of a single mom. He has sisters aged 5, 7, and 10. He likes soccer and was part of the SFL municipality championship team that took second place in the nationals. He loves to study and says that the W&C workshops have "helped my personality". He thanks W&C for their scholarship support and wants to study law so that he can "defend the rights of the people" against violence, injustice, and abuse. Again, no funds are currently available to help him continue his studies.

Adán spoke last. He is 15 and in his third year of high school. His mom and dad and 4 siblings (3 brothers, one sister) live 18 kilometers away from the Center, so he is living with his grandmother here in SFL so he can study at the high school here. There is no high school in his community. He visits home once a month by bus. As his community service project, he helps out with local first grade students. Adán is a member of a theatre group that gives national performances on topics such as the environment. In 2007 he traveled with the theatre group to Cuba for an international theater festival. He thanks W&C for their financial support. He was recently honored as the best student in SFL Municipality and received a laptop computer from President Daniel Ortega (who gave laptops to the best students in each municipality). Adán would like to study medicine because his parents have had health problems and he would like to be able to help them and other people.

Ed writes:

"I met [Adán] in San Francisco Libre. He is a teen from a small village that is so remote it does not have electricity or bus transportation. To visit his family [from where he goes to high school in SFL] he has to walk 7 miles between his home and the nearest bus stop. His dream is to be doctor....a dream that at first glance would seem impossible. When I met him in January 2009, he had completed with excellence the education that puts him at the brink of fulfilling his dream of going to medical school. The dream became a possibility through the resources of The Women and Community Center, a locally led partner-in-mission center connected with the United Methodist

Church located in San Francisco Libre. In addition to the love of his family, the mentoring and scholarship aid he received through the Women and Community Center is what has gotten him this far. His medical school education will happen with continued scholarship aid through this center's ministries. Upon completion of his schooling, his commitment is to return to his village, which is one part of San Francisco Libre, to care for the medical needs of the community."

The three teens talked about many topics. For example, they, like Helder, wish for a radio station to broadcast education programs on such topics as advice for teens, HIV/AIDS (because there has been an increase in HIV among teens), and preparing oneself for dating and healthy adult relationships.

They told us about high school. High school in Nicaragua lasts for 5 years. There are 7-8 classes daily including PE, but two new subjects are being added to the basic ones: economics and philosophy. English is the only foreign language offered, but apparently only at a very basic level. Popular courses at the universities include law, systems engineering, and business education.

Jocelyn writes:

"The kids I met in San Francisco Libre were mostly different from kids that I know in America because of their drive. The three students we met were Rebecca, Manuel, and Adan, who were all between the ages of 15 and 17. They were all so motivated to become something, because nothing is easily given to them; they have goals because if they don't, they know that nothing will ever get accomplished. Since money is scarce, but education is still expensive, scholarships are virtually the only practical way of getting educated, and so this is the reason we try to raise money to send a student to college. I feel like a lot of kids in America don't feel an urge to *become* anything, because they don't see what needs to be changed. The youth in San Francisco Libre are right in the middle of everything that's happening, because there are no suburbs to hide behind, no unions to protect jobs and give workers rights. I think that's the reason why they're so driven, and it's a great thing to see, because it gives me hope for the future of their town, and their country."

Ellen writes:

"I was really impressed and heartened by the very bright and committed young people who we met. They are the future of Nicaragua. They seem very adult, grounded, focused and serious. They have very different worries and concerns than most US teens of the same age. I feel it is incumbent upon us, who have so much in the way of education, to contribute financially toward the education of these dedicated young people."

We were very interested in what the teens had to say and were inspired by their determination to get an education despite many serious obstacles. We could have talked with them all afternoon, but had to tear ourselves away so that we could meet with the newly elected mayor.

Again we walked about a mile or so to the mayor's office near the Women's Clinic in downtown SFL. His office is located in the salmon-colored Casa de Gobierno Municipal. Mayor José Angel Velásquez was most kind to meet with us on his second day in office and to answer our many questions. The mayor noted that he had worked closely with W&C (and with Methodist Churches from the USA) when he was mayor of SFL in 2001-2004 and hopes to continue that relationship into the future.

The mayor's priorities are

- potable water
- access to farthest communities
- health improvements
- education

- nutrition

He would also like to pave more roads, build bridges, build a dock, improve electricity service, and develop a tourism project that would bring more people and more money to the municipality. The mayor said that it has been a struggle to sell SFL as a tourist destination even though it has beautiful forests, a former hydrotherapy center with hot springs, and a waterfall. The municipal government is working with INTOUR (the Nicaraguan Tourism Institute). Ferry service from Managua to SFL is part of a national development plan as is the building of an airport in 2010.

Finances for local projects come from municipal taxes (sales, real estate, registration) and money transfers. Taxes have trended downward due to the economy, and so raising money for the government's priorities is a major concern.

The Municipal council that was just elected includes 3 members of FSLN (Ortega's party) and 1 of PLN (the opposition party). There are 2 men and 2 women. The vice-mayor is a woman. The FSLN Party has an internal policy of placing 50% men and 50% women in positions of authority.

When asked why water is available for only 12 hours a day, the mayor answered that it is a water saving measure and that, generally speaking, the people do not yet have the idea of water conservation (which is necessary, especially in the dry season).

After talking to the mayor, we walked back to our homes to freshen up for dinner and devotions. The focus hymn was Jan's favorite, "Morning Has Broken". Reflections from team members included the following wonderful quote: "I have never seen so much grace in a bucket of lukewarm water!" We also reflected on "how the longer we stay here, the easier it gets". A team member lamented on how Americans in general don't pay attention to the rest of the world. And we agreed that we feel great confidence that the money that we (and the United Methodist Church) send to W&C is very, very well managed.

Thursday, January 22, 2009

SAN FRANCISCO LIBRE

During the course of the week, Joyce and Ellen talked (in Spanish) to the mamá in their host family about many things. Below is what they learned about a typical day in her life.

- She awakes at 4-4:30 AM. This is when the first customer knocks on the front door of the pulperia (saying "Buenas, buenas"), wanting to buy corn and have it ground in the electric mill.
- From 4-6 AM she cleans the house and makes breakfast for the family. She helps about a dozen customers who want corn and other items from the store.
- From 4 AM to 8 PM she works in the store, along with her sister.
- At 2 p.m. she cooks and serves the main meal of the day and cleans up. (There is no third meal of the day.)
- Evenings, she listens to music (mostly Christian music), talks with family and/or friends.
- The family goes to bed at 9-9:30 p.m.

Her 6 year old son goes to school from 7 a.m. until 2 p.m. Monday through Friday. He likes school, especially math, P.E., and practical education. He rides his bike to school. There are 30 children in his class.

Sunday is her favorite day of the week because there is less work. She attends the local Catholic church for 2 hours in the morning; they "sing and the padre talks". Afterwards the family buys beef soup for dinner, so she does not have to cook. The pulperia and mill are only open in the afternoon.

Today our morning's activities were similar to yesterday's, with each work crew at its respective location.

After lunch we learned about W&C programs relating to the issues of Human Rights and Prevention of Violence Against Women, Youth and Children. (Miguel, who recently received his law degree, works a lot with these programs.)

Nan writes:

"[These programs educate] women, youth and children about human rights and the different laws in Nicaragua that protect them from gender and age violence. Violence against women and children is the order of the day in Nicaragua....[The] program also does violence prevention training with women who work in their communities and accompany victims of violence in their legal and healing processes....The program employs a lawyer and a psychologist who work with the women and youth who come to our center with problems of psychological, physical and sexual abuse....Before this program existed, the violators went unpunished and domestic violence was seen as a private issue. Now men are beginning to understand that gender and age-violence are public problems punishable by law and a threat to the social order. Things have begun to improve, but we have a long road to hoe before there's any semblance of true gender equality. We are also working with young men and women on these issues. "

Maria Felix Arauz and Minerva Salmeron, members of the W&C staff, spoke with us. Sra. Arauz is a psychologist and group facilitator. Sra. Salmeron is a lawyer. They told us that there is a great lack of knowledge about the national laws relating to human rights for women and teens. They (and others) educate women and children about their human rights under the law. This W&C program provides violence prevention training to women who work in their communities as advocates. The advocates work directly with women who have been abused, accompany them through the legal process (coordinating with the police, judges, and mayor's office), and provide follow-up during the healing process, including support groups. Sra. Arauz talks to high school students about HIV, about relationships between parents and children, about family violence, sex and gender, courtship, virginity, and the use of condoms. She provides family therapy. She works with women and families who are abandoned when the man goes to work in another country and stays there.

Sra. Salmeron works directly with women who have suffered rape or abuse. She is currently working with 30 women (teenagers through 40s) and there are 10 new cases per month. She accompanies them through the legal process: to the police in SFL, to the Institute of Forensic Medicine in Managua, to the prosecutor's office in Tipitapa, and to the local judge. She said that often in judicial cases, male judges favor the man. But now they at least have one woman judge. (Judges serve a 15 year term.) Sra. Salmeron meets bi-monthly with a commission that follows each case.

Nan writes:

[This program also trains] "educators and students, health workers, police and other groups to understand the roots of violence, the laws that prevent and sanction violence and how to use them."

Right now, projected for 2009, there is a lack of funds to support these Human Rights and Violence Prevention programs. Donations are needed to pay for those accompanying the victims, since many trips to the capitol are required for each case. \$100/month pays for five women and an advocate to go to Managua.

Ellen writes:

“Nicaraguan women seem to me to be very strong and long-suffering, putting up with a lot from the machismo culture. Because of programs such as those run by W&C (and through efforts by the Nicaraguan government), they are learning to stand up for their rights. I am glad that the houses and cows are being put in women’s names because it changes the balance of power in a good way, provides them with some economic security, and also preserves their children’s inheritance.”

Our team reflected many times over the course of our week in SFL that the W&C programs are very well thought out and very well organized. The programs are directly reaching their target audiences. The staff is hard-working, knowledgeable, competent, and extremely dedicated to the people they serve. As a church and as individuals we can feel confident that money given toward W&C programs is money that will be well spent!

As so often happened during our time in Nicaragua, we were running late because of our interest in whichever speaker was talking to us. So we thanked Sra. Arauz and Sra. Salmeron, and as quickly as we could (given that it was the hottest day of the week), we again walked the mile through the dry fields, past a tree shaded park, to the SFL office of the national Ministry of Education. We had an appointment with Hilda Gomez, a local delegate of the Ministry of Education.

In a small office covered with maps of the municipality, charts of statistics, and lists of all the schools, Sra. Gomez told us about the education of SFL Municipality’s 3,469 students. The municipality has 32 preschool/elementary schools, 3 regular high schools, and one high school that offers classes on Saturday and Sunday to accommodate working students, students who live far out in the countryside, and adults who hope to finish their high school education.

The elementary schools educate students from preschool through grade 6. Some of the classes are multi-grade (e.g. 1-2, 3-4, or 5-6). The average class size is 40 students (25 in a multi-grade class). In elementary school, children have books to use. In fourth grade students begin to receive drug education and sex education.

There is a national curriculum for teachers to follow in order to try to standardize the curriculum across the country. In high school, the students often use paper copies of books. Economics and philosophy have just been added to the curriculum. There are required readings as part of the high school curriculum.

There are no special education classes at any level. There are no trade schools yet in SFL, but trade schools are part of future plans for the system. There are no music or art classes. Literacy education is available for adults.

An elementary teacher makes about \$158 per year and a high school teacher makes about \$165 per year. Teachers need to have a “certificate of behavior” from the police in order to be hired. Teachers may not use physical punishment. Teachers have the right to strike. Teachers can retire at age 65 or after 750 months (15-20 years) at 65% of their salary.

At the conclusion of our meeting with Sra. Gomez, we were given the unusual opportunity to visit the site of what was formerly a center for hydrotherapy and fangotherapy (thermal mud treatments), a facility which featured and utilized the natural hot springs that exist in SFL. The facility is located about 2 miles away from downtown SFL.

Luckily, since it was so very hot, we were able to get a ride to the facility on board a Pepsi delivery truck. We clambered up into the open back of the truck for a ride down dirt roads, further out into the countryside. (We often saw Pepsi trucks in the countryside. Pepsi was clearly a favorite soft drink. Coke, according to some Nicaraguans, is much too much associated with the US government.) A few of the staff and teens from W&C met us at the facility.

This facility was designed by Architects Without Borders and you could see that it had once been quite nice. Originally it had been owned and operated by the government and its services were available to citizens with various health problems; however, Nan told us, it had been sold some years ago (during one of the SLN presidencies) to a private individual and the facility has fallen into disrepair.

We wandered down paved paths or rested on white stone benches scattered here and there under palm trees. Most of us spent some time relaxed in a shallow blue-tiled swimming pool, shaded by trees. The hot springs were just a short walk down a path away from the pool. You could see the steam rising from the springs, even on this very hot day. On the other side of the hot springs, horses were grazing in a field

Ordinarily, the facility is not open to the public, but Nan had made special arrangements for us to visit. If upgraded and renovated, this former hydrotherapy/fangotherapy facility could well be a centerpiece of future tourist development in SFL. Although the pool was clean and pleasant (especially on such a hot day), the rest of the facility (bathrooms, changing rooms, fangotherapy rooms, etc.) had definitely seen better days.

We decided to hold our devotions at the pool and we invited the W&C staff and teens to join us. The hymn was Doug's favorite: "How Great Thou Art."

Listening to our Nicaraguan friends, we were moved as they shared some of their thoughts with us.

- "Thanks for all you have done, for your support for the people, for bringing joy to the children. The families will always remember you."
- "We would like to be united and coordinated like your team."
- "It was a pleasure to share the pool with you."
- "Before you came, I thought that we had many differences between us, but now that I have met you, I realize we have the same heart."
- "You will remain in our hearts."

Then our team shared some thoughts about our time in SFL.

- "The things that you (at W&C) do, no one else in the country does. We are pleased to be partners with you."
- "If the government were smart, it would duplicate what you are doing and use it as a model for other communities."
- "You challenge us to do something more."
- "You have been very kind to us. The youth are so inspiring."
- "We have heard so much, learned so much, and people were so nice. We also really enjoyed our ride in the Pepsi truck."
- "The youth are the future of both of our countries. We were inspired by the W&C youth and their dreams for the future."
- "We are sorry that we have to leave."
- "We will never forget you."

As the afternoon drew to a close, we piled back into the Pepsi truck to return to our host families to pack. Our hosts couldn't believe that riding in an open truck bed is not allowed on US highways. We made our way once more up the dusty, rocky path to the Center where we had planned a good-bye dinner for our host families. All the children signed the Center guest book. After speeches by Ed and by Juan (the father in Ed's host family), we enjoyed dinner together.

After dinner everyone went down the hill to Juan and Elsa's house (where Ed and Alan were staying). Earlier we had purchased a piñata and filled it with candies for the children. Rachel

and Adrián took turns blindfolding the children and spinning them. Juan was in charge of raising and lowering the piñata as the blindfolded children tried to hit it with a big stick. There was a mad scramble for candies when the piñata finally broke. The tradition is to burn the piñata after everyone gets candies. The older children ran and jumped over the flames. It was hard for some of us moms and grandmas not to call out “Be careful!” Juan and Elsa put on recorded music and some of the children started dancing. Alan and Doug bravely joined in. Amid smiles and laughter, Jennifer led a conga line all around the yard, up into the road and back again.

Diane writes:

“I noticed that most of the kids had an interest in music. In my house, the daughter... had a few CDs that she played for me and I know others in the group said their families played music, too. Some younger girls drew a lot of pictures and gave them out at the piñata party.”

Friday, January 23, 2009 SAN FRANCISCO LIBRE, THEN BACK TO MANAGUA

This was our last morning in SFL. At 8:30 the team gathered together and walked around to each of the homes of our host families to take a group picture with each family. At Laura and Shelly’s host family, the daughter of the family, Jasmina, offered a very moving prayer on our behalf.

After the group pictures we finished our packing and then met the children on one of the newly painted playgrounds to await the arrival of the ice cream man. We had arranged for ice cream as a thank-you treat for all the children who had helped us paint. It was already very hot in the sun, although it was OK if you stayed in the shade. Jan played UNO with a group of children while we waited.

Finally the ice cream man arrived on his bicycle, a large *Styrofoam* box strapped to the handlebars. Adrián had the children line up smallest to tallest, with boys in one line and girls in the other. It was hard to choose from frozen fruit bars, fudge popsicles, chocolate-covered ice cream bars, and ice cream cups.

After everyone finished eating and all the wrappers were picked up, we returned one last time to our host families to say our goodbyes. We took our suitcases to Juan and Elsa’s house where we sat in front of the house in the shade and chatted until our bus pulled up. Ellen translated for Jan as she told humorous stories about her family and her early life on a farm.

Ellen writes:

“I also talked in Spanish to a young man who was about 10-11 years old. We talked about airplanes. He was the only person who really asked me many questions the whole time I was in SFL, even though I invited people to ask questions. He wanted to know where we had come from, how far away it was, how long it took to get here, and how did we get here. Perhaps he had only seen airplanes on TV or in books (I saw no airplanes fly over SFL while I was there) because he seemed surprised when I told him about their size, how high up they fly, that there are bathrooms on airplanes, and that you are served coffee on the plane. He was also surprised at how far we had traveled to visit SFL. I wish I had met and talked to this young man earlier because I think we could have had some other interesting conversations.”

At last the bus arrived. As the luggage was being loaded, there was another round of hugs, handshakes, goodbyes, and “I-will-never-forget-you” plus not a few tears.

Rachel writes:

“When going on a mission trip, you must be prepared to expect the unexpected--whether the unexpected is good, or in some cases bad. On the mission trip to Nicaragua, I

experienced many things I did not anticipate experiencing, despite all of the “classes” [that I] and the VIM team attended prior to our departure. Yes, we were warned about the bathroom situation and the cockroaches, but no amount of lecturing will fully prepare you when you must walk out to a latrine at night, surrounded by what seems like hundreds of 6 inch long red cockroaches and a stench that seems suffocating. However, despite the less than glamorous living conditions, I experienced the unexpected in a much more moving way. The most important thing I took home from the mission trip was the relationships and the connections I made with the people in San Francisco Libre and Managua.”

The bus took us up to the W&C Center for one final presentation, a videotape on the Center’s programs that had been produced by the teens. It was very professionally done.

Jennifer writes:

[I would like to share] “the miracle that is our covenant relationship with Nan and Miguel and, by association, Women and Community. This is a group of women (a few men) completely committed to working together, with each other and God, to solve the many complex issues of a nation that has been poor so long there is no corporate memory of anything different or better.... these women have worked, sometimes more than half their lives, to achieve degrees in Agronomy, Law, Psychology, Social Work and Education – all for the purpose of serving their communities.

“We spent an often exhausting week learning everything we could about the mission of Women and Community (Nan and Miguel’s primary focus) so that we could share with you the important work they are doing.... Women and Community has designed and executed a number of very important programs focused on supporting the total family in Nicaragua.

“The micro-economic program allows a woman to buy a cow and start a ‘herd’, providing them with, most importantly food, but also an opportunity to make a dignified living. The teen awareness program, organized by teens and for teens, informs and educates teens about violence in the home and sexual responsibility – it’s a chance to change their future. The Women’s Health Clinic supports 2,000 women each year in reproductive health--especially impressive is [how] they have been able to reduce the incidence of cervical and uterine cancer by more than 50% simply by offering routine PAP screening and individualized follow up. They have ‘rescued’ homeopathic recipes that were part of the oral history and formalized them to provide affordable foods, medicines, and jobs to SFL residents. The Scholarship Fund allows 90+ of the neediest children to attend high school and eventually college.”

There were no postcards or tourist items for sale at all in SFL, only a few Che Guevara T-shirts. However, today there were some teen artists at the Center selling paintings and drawings that they had made. Many of us bought artwork as a memento of our time in SFL.

Ellen writes:

“I took a photo of the young woman artist who had created the drawing I bought. Her drawing is a still life of Nicaraguan fruits on a plate done in oranges, yellows, greens and black.”

After lunch and with many smiles and waves, we left San Francisco Libre to head back to Managua. In addition to helping the community with our work at the Center and the four playgrounds, the costs associated with our projects and our visit put over \$9,000 of much needed revenue directly into the local SFL economy.

We spotted a white heron standing in a stream bed. On the bus ride back, Bruce, Alan, and Ellen brainstormed about possibilities for tourist development in SFL Municipality.

We stopped briefly at Nan and Miguel's house in Ciudad Jardin (Garden City), a neighborhood in Managua near the Eastern Market. The homes in the neighborhood were built during the 1960s under the Alliance for Progress program. The house is very pretty inside, especially the tiled garden patio.

A real serendipity for us was that, as we got off the bus, some street musicians happened to be strolling down the block toward us. There were two drummers and a 10 foot tall puppet (with the puppeteer inside) called "La Gigantona" (the giant woman). For a small fee Nan arranged for the troupe to play a few songs as La Gigantona twirled and whirled. Then Jan took a turn inside La Gigantona! Nan says that some Nicaraguan parents will tell their children that if they don't behave, La Gigantona will "get them".

On the way back to the hotel, we bid a sad "adios" and a very grateful "muchísimas gracias" to our patient translator, Adrián. By midweek in SFL, it was clear that he had truly become the 14th member of our team.

When we arrived back at the hotel, it seemed so luxurious.

After dinner (rice, red beans, chimichurri beef, fresh fruit juice), we met with Colleen Littlejohn, a US citizen, who is the World Bank's Senior Country Official in Nicaragua. She and her staff are in charge of keeping tabs on the portfolio of all the World Bank projects in Nicaragua, including many infrastructure projects such as rural roads, alternative energy sources for isolated communities, water and sanitation projects. Development on the east coast of the country is much worse than the center and west. Fifty percent of people have no electricity, water, or paved roads.

Ms. Littlejohn talked about the complex political situation here. For example, privatization of such services as electricity and water has not worked very well in this country, although the privatization of telecommunications has worked. She said that improvement in the energy situation is one of the best things the Ortega government has done. (Under the previous administration, electricity was cut to 8-12 hours per day.) She also noted the Ortega government's commitment to renewable sources of energy.

One of the current problems is the country's level of debt, a legacy of the corrupt practices of previous administrations and the 2001 economic meltdown. Another problem is that the mental health of the population of the nation as a whole is severely compromised because of so many economic and political crises, the civil war, and recurring national disasters. She also feels that the development of Free Trade Zones was probably not the best thing to do.

Ms. Littlejohn told us many interesting facts about the Nicaraguan economy.

- The entire country uses 470 megawatts of electricity/year, about as much as the city of Massena in upstate New York.
- The main Nicaraguan export products are coffee, sesame seed, soy, sugar, meat, milk products, and clothing produced in the Free Trade Zones.
- The birthrate is decreasing.
- The median age has increased to 18.
- There is a minimum wage but it is very low.
- Currently the economic backbone of the country is small-to-medium sized farmers and businesses.
- There are many call centers here.
- Inflation in 2008 was 13%.

- Most communities have at least some internet access and telecommunication.
- The government is making a concerted effort to keep drugs out of the country.
- The current head of the national police force is a woman, a former nun.
- The government's priorities are water, roads (currently only about 10% of Nicaragua's roads are paved), energy, and education.

The Nicaraguan government has indicated that water and sanitation projects are priorities for the use of World Bank money. Ms. Littlejohn said that the World Bank is satisfied with the way their money is being spent.

Ms. Littlejohn feels that tourism is the untapped resource of Nicaragua. For example, in San Juan del Sur on the Pacific coast, there are many unspoiled beaches. She thinks that community-based tourism, rather than large corporate chain development, is the way to go, especially since many of the smaller developers pay decent wages.

After our discussion with Ms. Littlejohn, Nan and Miguel joined us for devotions which were led by Shelly (since Ed was under the weather). Joyce's favorite, "Breathe on Me, Breath of God", was the focus hymn.

We began reflecting on how we experienced the breath of God's love in Nicaragua this week. Many intense and emotional thoughts were shared.

- "The fan [above us on the porch of the hotel] creates the breath of God as we are in fellowship [together at this moment]. The breath of God is here."
- "I experienced the breath of love from my mama and papa [in SFL], and especially from the daughter [in my family] who made a special effort."
- God's breath of love was in "Adrián's interaction with the kids [in SFL]."
- "I learned how grateful I am about everything I have, how much I take for granted."
- "This week everyone here has been helped by everyone here."
- "I experienced the breath of God with my roommate every day."
- "'Breathe on Me Breath of God' made me think of the dust in the wind [in SFL]. I felt a new life there [in SFL]."
- "I felt privileged to be living and working in SFL. I experienced a sense of fulfillment tying together many strands of my life during the time I have been in Nicaragua."
- "I felt God's love from the little girls who drew us pictures."
- In SFL, "I felt so comfortable and unencumbered. [I felt the breath of God's love] when my hostess sang at night."
- "With the three girls and their smiles....I felt really accepted, even more than some people in the US that I've known for years."
- "I'll look at things differently now. [I felt the breath of God's love] when the young woman said a prayer for us on the last day [in SFL]."
- I experienced God's love in the "warm hugs when we were saying goodbye."

Since we were scheduled to leave for Volcán Masaya early in the morning, and since other people were trying to sleep in rooms that adjoined our meeting area, we said "Buenas noches" to Nan and Miguel and headed for bed.

Saturday, January 24, 2009

MANAGUA

A few of us got up very early and watched the dawn break, sitting on the front patio of the hotel, drinking our morning beverage of choice and chatting about our experiences this week. The birdsongs were beautiful, the air was just warm enough.

Breakfast was pancakes with jelly and a fresh fruit tray. After breakfast we toured the countryside by bus to visit some places of natural beauty. Our first stop was Volcán Masaya National Park. Volcán Masaya, an active volcano, is sometimes known as “the door into hell”. Nan said that over the course of Nicaragua’s history both the Spanish and the Somozas threw people into the crater’s bubbling lava. After driving through extensive fields of lava flow formed during previous eruptions, we parked the bus and got out to explore. All the vehicles in the parking lot had to park facing out toward the exit, “just in case”. (The last major eruption was in 1772.)

We were able to walk right up to the edge of the volcano. Clouds of sulfurous gas and smoke roiled up into the air from the deep crater. A twisting stone staircase led up a steep hill overlooking the crater. A huge cross sat on the top. An intrepid subgroup from our team climbed up to the top of the hill. As they were taking pictures, the wind changed and started blowing the cloud of sulfurous gas toward them. Lungs burning, they came down the hill quickly.

Looking out in the opposite direction from the volcano, you could see a wide, green and tan swath of the Nicaraguan countryside, including farmlands, the outskirts of Managua, a distant row of volcanoes marching along together, and the enormous Lake Managua. From this vantage point, everything looked so peaceful that it was hard to imagine how much violence and heartache has existed in this beautiful county.

From Volcán Masaya, we traveled to the lovely blue waters of Laguna de Apoyo (Lake Apoyo), an out-of-the-way lake on a bumpy, hilly road that took us through a dry tropical forest. Lake Apoyo is a crater lake (with a 6 km diameter) ringed by forests. Directly across the lake you could see yet another volcano, the peak of which was constantly ringed by clouds. The weather was perfect, warm and breezy, so breezy that there were little whitecaps on the lake. We alighted at a little hotel/resort called “La Abuela” (the grandmother). Many people changed into their swimsuits and took a quick dip in the cool waters of the lake. Others just relaxed in the shade on a large dock. We had a tasty lunch at the hotel’s open-air restaurant. Many of us ordered the fried tilapia which was especially good. This was the only time on the trip that French fries and Diet Coke were available, so the resort must deal with an American clientele at least some of the time.

Next we headed toward the artisan city of Masaya (pronounced like Messiah). It was founded in 1819 and currently has a population of about 90,000. Along the road to Masaya we saw the poorest of living conditions, little shacks. Every mile or so there was a small church, usually Pentecostal. Driving into Masaya we noticed women walking at the edge of the road with trays of food balanced on their heads. We parked next to the Mercado Viejo (Old Market) which is located inside grey fortress-like stone walls and covers a full square block in downtown Masaya.

The little shops lining the aisles of the market sell an abundance of goods (hammocks, clothes, jewelry, sculpture, paintings, terra cotta pottery, leather goods, toys, etc.), all hand-made by Nicaraguan artisans, all at very low prices. Several people bought the colorful hand-made hammocks. Jan got a basket of brightly colored flowers made from dyed corn-husks similar to the ones we had seen on the tables at the W&C Center.

After our shopping foray, we left our purchases on the bus and walked to ACODEMA, the Consumer Association of Masaya, located in another one of the small Christian Base Communities. We spoke with Roger Lacayo, the head of ACODEMA and a passionate defender of the rights of the common people. ACODEMA was founded in 1999 by a group of lawyers concerned by some recently enacted laws that privatized the electricity and telecommunications industries. These laws have caused severe problems for many consumers.

Sr. Lacayo told about his time in the Army during the Civil War. "I was in the Army and God spared me. I need to do something meaningful with my life."

The goal of the staff of ACODEMA is to accompany and defend people who have problems with their electricity/water/telephone/bank bills, in particular unfair or fraudulent overcharges. In addition, the group is working to change the laws.

In 2008, ACODEMA helped resolve 8,000 individual cases and 102 collective cases, with an 85% success rate, according to Sr. Lacayo. ACODEMA also runs a very successful "call-in" radio program Monday through Friday from 7-8 a.m. which informs people of their rights and presents other consumer education and information.

We had dinner at a Mexican restaurant back in Managua. Everyone was very, very tired at this point. When we got back to the hotel, we received final departure instructions. Nan and Ed reminded us that while we were away from our families, life had gone on without us. They recommended that we don't try to tell our stories all at once, but rather try to work them into the context of our daily lives.

We said grateful (and poignant) goodbyes to Nan and Miguel. They were just incredible guides, educators, and mentors to us this week. We will always look to them as role models for lives fully lived in Christ. Many, many thanks also go to Ed who was our outstanding team leader.

Although there was not enough time for formal devotions, the hymn for tonight, Jennifer's favorite, "Sanctuary", will be a good one to take with us into the future.

We packed our suitcases and went to sleep.

Sunday, January 25, 2009

MANAGUA TO MARYLAND

We left the hotel in plenty of time for our 8:50 a.m. flight back to Maryland. The airport security was very, very thorough.

As we lifted off, we could see Volcán Masaya emitting huge plumes of smoke. We were also able to grasp how large Lake Managua and Lake Nicaragua are...HUGE (10% of Nicaragua's surface area).

Many of us were lost in thought for much of the flight back home.

Jocelyn writes:

"Let me start out by saying that going in blind to something is terrifying. But sometimes, it can be very worthwhile. Now that I've been back and settled into my normal routine for a few months, I feel like I can say that it worked out better that I didn't know what to expect from going to Nicaragua. The whole experience was definitely a shock to the system, and in the span of 10 days, I learned more and did more than I ever thought I could do in a month. Everything that we saw was incredible and left an impression on us, but for me, the thing that I remember the most vividly is the people."

Doug writes:

"At the end of the day we arrived in SFL, I was walking with Shelly down the dirt road. Referring to the harsh conditions we would be living in that week I said to her, "You'll be stronger by the end of the week". She replied with a smile, "I'll kill you". By the end of the week she didn't want to leave and was already talking about returning to Nicaragua.

"I have always tried to be an involved and 'lead-by-example' parent. Experiencing Nicaragua with Laura and Shelly has helped me realize what a blessed person I am. PTL."

Jennifer writes:

"In the first couple of weeks after getting home, I struggled to describe to friends and family not just the experience but the essence of the country. Nicaragua is a beautiful, yet fragile, third world country. If it were a person, I would say they have very low self esteem but a strong intuition of their own potential. Yes, it is incredibly poor. And, unbeknownst to me, poverty is a sensory experience; it has a touch, a smell, a sound and a sight that can not be described. One of the continuing frustrations of this experience is that words, and even pictures, do not capture the reality.

"What did Nicaragua mean to me? Originally, this trip represented an opportunity to share something special with Rachel her senior year. I remember thinking she suffered somewhat from the 'teen suburban blues' and [I] wanted her to see something of the bigger world [; but I] was also motivated by putting into action some of my own long held beliefs about volunteerism in the global community. I never expected that I would be so profoundly affected. This trip was truly the love and compassion of Jesus Christ in action.

"The take home message for me at the end of the week was 'this dedicated group of people, inspired and informed by Nan and Miguel, supported in part by our gifts and our prayers and driven to live their faith, do an outstanding job of discerning the most important needs of their community and we need to continue to support them in this work financially, with prayer and when it works, with our presence.'

"Ed challenged us to stop each day and recognize one moment of God's grace ... when did I most feel the presence of God? I feel it still each time I look at Rachel and remember our experience; in each memory of the children of SFL whose homes we inhabited and meals we shared; when I look at the pictures or talk to talk to one of my teammates; and when I look around at you [the congregation of EUMC] and know that without your love and commitment to the phrase 'God with us' this mission, this faith journey, this work would not be possible."

Ellen writes:

"The people of Nicaragua deserve our respect and attention. I hope that US government policy under the new administration is revised to be more favorable toward the people here.

"It was such a pleasure to work with this particular mission team. Nan thought and I agree that our group functioned very well together and with the people in SFL. (She and Miguel host lots of groups each year.) She said that not every group gets to go to SFL, maybe one group every year or two.

"I learned so much...I will always have a special place in my heart for the people of Nicaragua.

"Looking down, as we flew into the Atlanta Airport, everything seemed so orderly (road patterns, developments, neighborhoods, parks), reflecting someone's planning. I thought about the different rules and regulations in this county compared to Nicaragua. I thought about how much I appreciate having clean unlimited water and hot water; garbage collection; having a sewage system; our clean, quiet, spacious home...all things that I take for granted.

“What’s next? My dream for EUMC as a congregation and for me personally is to continue our new relationship with the Nicaraguan people through the ministries of Nan and Miguel. Some of my personal goals are to tell the story of our time in Nicaragua (including this journal), to never forget the people of SFL and of Nicaragua, to help EUMC increase our giving to Nan and Miguel’s ministries (especially to W&C programs), to encourage another trip in 4-5 years, to keep current on what’s happening in Nicaragua, and to personally donate money to W&C each year.”

Ed writes:

“...I have for many years practiced the spiritual discipline of immersing myself into other cultures for periods of time and have encouraged others to join me in the journey. The United Methodist Volunteer-In-Mission ministry has given a framework for this discipline. The ministry gives a chance to do ‘the good work’ for others I might at first see as less fortunate. Given the invitation...the ministry goes to a second level of depth.....the opportunity to live in an environment that pushes the comfort zone to try out different daily routines and experience the grace of God in what might have been shut out by my prejudgment. It is then the real reason for my passion to immerse myself into another’s world reveals itself to me. It is what happens to me as my sense of God’s grace and peace emerges in forms quite unexpected....

“The mission experience in Nicaragua continues to reach into my life as the Emmanuel ‘NICA’ team shares stories about the emerging passion we have for people who are now part of our extended ‘family’. The stories shared that involve Rebecca, Manuel, Adan, Gladys, Juan, Marie Fernanda, Elsa remind us that we are part of one world, one creative act of God in Jesus, one baptism. The stories remind us to use this base of God’s grace as the beginning point for our search for ways to support dreams and hopes that will lead to the peace that surpasses human understanding.”

It was so great to see our families again...
but we will never forget our time in Nicaragua.

Gracias a Dios. What a privilege!

Respectfully submitted, May 14, 2009

**Ellen J. McDaniel
Team Journal Keeper**

**I have tried to faithfully report (with help
from my teammates and to the best of my ability)
both the events and the memories of
our January 2009 VIM-Nicaragua mission trip.**

Donating to “Women and Community” Projects through “The Advance”

What is the “Women and Community Association”? The Women and Community Association serves women, youth and children in San Francisco Libre, Nicaragua, in the areas of health, education, promotion of economic alternatives for single mothers, human rights, and prevention of violence. The Association provides spaces for empowerment so that women can transform their lives and develop more democracy in their relationships, families, and communities. The Association provides training in all of the above-mentioned areas with women and youth.

What is “The Advance”? It is a way to give directly to United Methodist Church sponsored projects all over the world. One-hundred percent (100%) of money given goes **directly** to the ministry/project you choose.

Donate through Emmanuel United Methodist Church:

Make your check payable to **EUMC**.

Write **“Women and Community #13285A”** on the memo line of the check.

Add an extra note on the memo line if you want to specify one of the “Women and Community Association” projects listed below.****

Put your gift in the offering plate.

****Add an extra note on your memo line specifying one of the following projects:

Women’s Clinic
Youth Scholarship Program
Cows in Women’s Hands
Prevention of Violence

Donate online:

Google “Global Ministries online giving”.

Click on “Global Ministries Donations-Make a Gift Online”.

In the box marked “Find Projects”, enter code **#13285A**.

Click “Search”.

Click on result #1: **“Women and Community”**.

Scroll down and follow directions for online donation.

After the donation process is completed, if you want to specify one of the “Women and Community Association” projects listed below, email the name of the project and amount of donation to Nan McCurdy at nanmig1@yahoo.com.

Projects: **Women’s Clinic**
Youth Scholarship Program
Cows in Women’s Hands
Prevention of Violence