

Faith Story: Youth Witness for Peace in Nicaragua **Will Farlessyost, 2011**

This summer I traveled to Nicaragua. Many of you donated to this trip, and I received a scholarship through Circle of Mercy's Peace Pilgrimage Fund. I'd like to thank you all up front for this. My trip would not have been possible without your help. I'd also like to thank Linda Mashburn who began encouraging me to participate in a teen delegation as early as last year. In the time I have, I'd like to relate to you some of the experiences that I had that impacted me the most.

I traveled with a group called Witness for Peace, which was established in 1983 to oppose the Reagan administration's support of the Nicaraguan "Contra" war. They thought that if enough US citizens were witness to human rights abuses the US government was funding, military funding could be ended and the abuse would stop. In the last almost thirty years, Witness for Peace has sent hundreds of delegations to not only Nicaragua but also Guatemala, Colombia, and Cuba, educating thousands of people and making a positive impact throughout Central America. Joyce was part of the establishment of the organization, and many of you have supported and participated in Witness For Peace delegations throughout the years.

I was part of a teen delegation comprised of sixteen individuals from the ages of 14 to 19. Also on the trip were our two adult leaders, Kevin Ressler and Gail Phares. Gail has worked in Central America for many, many years and regularly organizes delegations. The members of my team were from all over the country and had various levels of Spanish speaking ability, travel experience, activist work, political views, and soccer ability. Our training and organization of the trip were done by three long term volunteers with Witness for Peace who live in Managua.

The delegation lasted two weeks and included many different things including both urban and rural homestays with Nicaraguan families, a thorough history lesson of the Nicaraguan revolution, and a visit to the US foreign embassy (not a pleasant experience). Our trip organizers made a big point of showing the contrasts within the country. We visited a sweat shop in a free trade zone and an artisan cooperative; a market and a shopping mall that was nice even by U.S. standards; the Managua municipal dump and a rural cooperative. At different times during the trip I was at a national independence celebration and heard Hugo Chavez speak, met many people who had been involved in the Sandinista revolution, and met dozens of people who are working for the betterment of their communities even in very difficult circumstances.

I won't go into a lot of depth of explanation here, but I will say that US policies and the practices of the IMF and the World Bank have done great damage to everyday Nicaraguans. We saw that everywhere we looked in the persistent poverty, lack of health care, lack of quality education, and lack of fair wages.

One of the most glaring examples of this was apparent at the Managua dump. Here we saw the worst poverty on our trip. Entire communities of people had sprung up around the dump. People sorted through garbage all day long to find just a tiny bit of food, or things that could be sold for cash. It's a dangerous place to live and work. Last year three eight year olds who lived in the dump died after accidentally consuming rat poison that they mistook for candy. There is also a considerable amount of gang violence as people struggle for resources. As you can imagine, the health problems with living in the dump are rampant. We visited a community center that seeks to improve the lives of the residents. We were told that AIDs and malaria are constant threats. Upper respiratory infections, flu, and stomach worms were also severe dangers. The community center tries to provide medical help, but is limited by resources and cultural understanding. It was a hard place to visit.

The lack of social services in the country as well as the lack of living wage jobs has produced a terrible problem of street children. We met kids whose parents had migrated north looking for work, and had left their children behind to fend for themselves where they were vulnerable to sexual abuse, drugs, illness, malnutrition, and violence. This happened to children of all ages, even as young as two or three. All of the children sniffed glue to take the edge of their hunger. Some of those children had been fortunate enough to be involved in a program that we visited that got them off drugs and off the street. The program was in three parts: 1) to get them off the street and off of drugs, 2) to educate and further their work skills, and 3) to prepare them for life in the world. It was a spot of hope in a dark place.

The trip wasn't all about sad places and sad people. In the evenings we went to community celebrations that were full of laughter and dancing; we went to a national independence day celebration; we saw fully functioning hospitals and schools; and we saw a beautiful country. The people of Nicaragua are amazing. Many live on less than a dollar a day and deal with regular threats of violence, yet they are able to cope in ways that amazed me.

Here is an example. Next to the rural land cooperative where we stayed, there was a Spanish land owner who tried to stop the community from having water, plowed up the community road, sent armed men into the community, and eventually set explosives off in the community water tank. When the community tried to press charges, the Spanish land owner bribed the local government and he has never been punished for his actions. The community has not given up. During the worst of the violence, they would post scouts every night to warn of impending danger. Community members could then flee the armed guards and avoid being shot. Even in the midst of all this I saw stable families, tended land, happy children, and people who cared about each other.

Along with the Nicaraguans, I was impressed with the folks who were on the delegation from the US. Every morning we had time to reflect and debrief what we had seen and heard. Having people my own age to help interpret our experiences was nice. We also shared important skills with each other like how to beat box, break dance, and how to laugh when things were ridiculous. Like my experience at Baptist Youth Camp this summer, it was good to find common ground with good folks.

Being among such smart and funny people gave us all courage to speak truth to power when we visited the U.S. Embassy. We asked pointed questions of our government officials like "How do you think the privatization of social services in Nicaragua due to IMF policies has affected the wellbeing of the people?" and "When will the US pay the \$3 billion dollars it owes to Nicaragua because of the war?" We didn't get great responses from them, but they need to know we are paying attention and will share it with other US citizens like all of you gathered here tonight.

It also helped to be with good folks as we stumbled through the inevitable awkward moments of traveling in a foreign land. As a country, the Nicaraguans are deeply patriotic. We talked with many that had participated in the Sandinista revolution either as soldiers or as support givers. At the annual revolution celebration it was intimidating to be in the midst of such unfettered fervor and I had some time to think over cultural intelligence when traveling. An elderly Nicaraguan became enraged that I was wearing a Che shirt, and that my friend was unknowingly wearing the color of the opposition to the Sandinista party. It didn't help to be a clueless American when mortars and machine guns were being fired all around us when patriotic anthems were playing.

Besides being really glad to have survived, there are other ways I have been changed. My dad had traveled to Nicaragua twenty five years ago with Witness for Peace, so I had some knowledge of the country and what had happened there. Seeing Nicaragua and being able to speak directly to people was much more powerful than reading something from a book or hearing stories from my other Circle of Mercy members. I knew already that US foreign policy had had a negative impact on the Nicaraguan people, but seeing the day to day realities made me want to advocate more. I have understood more clearly the need to speak another language than English and that to hear important stories I need to understand them in someone else's tongue. I am much clearer now about the impact of my day to day choices as a US citizen and my responsibility to the world.