¡HOLA! Now that we have finally settled into this amazing country and culture, we wanted to reach out to all our friends, family, alumni, and Xavier faculty to update you all on our experiences so far! It has only been 3 weeks of learning: from trying to survive our morning bus rides to becoming a part of our new Nicaraguan families. We have already learned so much about the rich history of this beautiful country. So far we have climbed volcanic craters in Masaya, have explored the cathedrals of Leon, and have swum in the fresh waters of Ometepe Island.

Not only have we gone on these amazing trips but we are also experiencing the daily life of a Nicaraguan, helping the community in our different services sites, and connecting while reflecting with our families and fellow group members.

Although we are enjoying ourselves we are still adjusting to the 6:30AM shouting vendors in the barrio, the crowing of the roosters at the break of dawn, and the unbearable heat. Our Spanish is slowly improving with each laugh that we create for our families.

We’re excited for more sweaty bus rides, ice cream cones, and dancing that are still to come!
Meet the Group

Ben Weibel Fresh.
**Major:** International Business and Marketing
**Minor:** Spanish
**Hometown:** West Harrison, IN
**Nica Family:** Doña Maritza, Don Rubén, Osman, Heidi, Melissa, Miau (Cat)

Dajah Siplin Soph.
**Major:** Health Services Administration
**Minor:** Business and Spanish
**Hometown:** West Chester, OH
**Nica Family:** Doña Urania, Don José, Jorge Jr., Chris, María Fernanda, Naomi, Luciana

Kaela Allton Sr.
**Major:** Psychology
**Minor:** Business, Theology
**Hometown:** Ashland, OH
**Nica Family:** Doña Marcia, Doña Juanita, Doña Mayra, Mario, Daniella

Rayanne Pancoast Soph.
**Major:** Biology and Spanish
**Hometown:** Indianapolis, IN
**Nica-Family:** Doña Elba, Don Mario, Hazel, Erenia, Elbta, Mario, Irene, Campanita (Dog), Figaro (Cat), Los Kevins (Chickens)

Alex Fath Soph.
**Major:** International Studies
**Minor:** Peace Studies
**Hometown:** Cleveland, OH
**Nica Family:** Doña Ana, Don José, Alicia, Carla.

Andrew Hermann Soph.
**Major:** Philosophy, Politics & the Public, and Sustainability
**Hometown:** Seattle, WA
**Nica Family:** Doña Nieves, Don Erasmo, Marián

Scott Quertinmont Soph.
**Major:** International Business and Spanish
**Hometown:** Caramel, IN
**Nica Family:** Doña Ivania, Ivan, Natalia, Lulú (Dog)

Mirka Gallo Soph.
**Major:** Social Work
**Minor:** Spanish
**Hometown:** Chicago, IL
**Nica Family:** Doña Coco, Alisson, Natalie, Tania, Osman, Junior (Dog)
Meet the Professors

Dr. Irene Hodgson
Dr. Irene Hodgson is a professor of Spanish at Xavier and the faculty trip leader of the Nicaragua Solidarity Semester. She is the professor for our Academic Service Learning and Culture and Society classes. It is through her vast knowledge and relationships with the Nicaraguan people that we are fortunate to have this unique experience.

Zoila
Zoila is our dancing instructor. She is very patient with us in our difficulties with moving our hips and staying with the beat. With Zoila we are learning traditional folk dances but also Merengue, Bachata, and Salsa.

Antonio Monte
Professor Monte is our History teacher at the University of Central America. This is the first time the students have attended classes at local Jesuit University in Managua. So far, we have been learning about the Pre-Colombian and Colonization Era of Nicaragua and expect to learn more about present-day history.

Dr. Walker Gollar
Dr. Gollar is our Liberation Theology/Psychology teacher. He was also one of our Prep Seminar leaders in Cincinnati and the Faculty Director for Study Abroad. With his great passion and dedication to the program and course material, he prepared us for the experiences we are having in Nicaragua.

Mirna Velásquez and Ana Ochoa
Mirna and Ana are our wonderful Spanish teachers here in Nicaragua. They are smart and patient women who are helping us improve our Spanish greatly with fun hands on activities that also incorporate our new families.

Shannon O’Neill
Shannon is the Study Abroad assistant in the Center for International Education at Xavier. She was also one of our Prep-Seminar leaders and also assists in the coordination of the program.
Aldo Chavarría:

While in Nicaragua we not only attend classes and go on weekend excursions, but the eight of us also work in the community at four different service sites. Mirka Gallo and Andrew Hermann work at the only rehabilitation hospital in the country of Nicaragua. It is called Aldo Chavarría. Home to the largest prosthesis-making center in Central America, Aldo’s hospital services and prosthetics are free to the population who needs them. Aldo works with both children and adults whether they be in-patient or out-patients. Along with the rehabilitation services, Aldo Chavarría also has a social worker, a psychologist, a speech therapist, and an occupational therapist on staff. Mirka and Andrew work at Aldo Monday-Wednesday for about 3-4 hours each day. They focus on working specifically with the in-patient/out-patient physical therapy, children, and amputees. Their time at Aldo is spent talking with patients who are waiting for or experiencing treatment. The students also assist the doctors in any way they can. The experience, though still new to them, is both educational and rewarding.

Meet the Castros

Kenia Castro

Kenia is from Managua, Nicaragua, and lives in the barrio where we are staying, Barrio La Luz. She is our confident trip assistant, who is with us everyday. Whether we are hustling between excursions or walking to classes, Kenia is always around to answer our questions and calm our nerves.}

Kenia is a vital part of the Nicaraguan team, without whom we would be unable to successfully complete the trip. She helps Irene with the accounting, scheduling, counseling, and coordination during our stay in Nicaragua. Her Nicaraguan knowledge and constant availability, helps us have fun, stay safe, and be on time throughout our day.

Martín Castro

Martín is our amazing and fearless driver, operations coordinator, father of Kenia and also now a father to us all. With his lively attitude and caring nature he assists with the transportation and the coordination throughout the week. Trying to count and transport 8 college students at 7am is a challenge in itself. His continuous positive attitude and humor helps keep our spirits high through the day. Martín’s dedication to the Xavier community has been a key element that has allowed the Nicaragua Solidarity Semester to complete its 20th anniversary this year.
EXCURSIONS!

León

We arrived in León after a two hour bus ride with the hope of learning more about the historical significance of the city. Luckily, we did just that. After learning about the pre-Colombian civilizations and the arrival of Conquistador Hernández de Córdoba in León Viejo, we quickly drove over to the modern day city of León. Almost immediately, the city rose up around us with historical monuments, paintings, and statues. We visited the home of Ruben Darío, an iconic poet in Nicaraguan history. Afterwards, we entered the city’s main plaza which was surrounded by coffee shops, governmental buildings, and a cathedral. We toured inside the cathedral and were also able to walk on the white roof of the building. The city’s immense landscape was laid out before us as we began to understand the cultural significance of such an ancient city.

Ometepe

Ometepe, an island in Lake Nicaragua, was our home for two days. The first night we enjoyed a beautiful sunset at Punta Jesús María. On the island, we visited the renowned museum of pre-Colombian artifacts and currency, sipped coffee at a coffee farm while learning about fair trade, hiked to Charco Verde, and enjoyed fresh fish for lunch. Each night, we gazed at the stars outlining the two volcanoes that dominate the island and talked about the day’s adventures. The ferry ride back to the mainland was filled with a longing to return to the island. Nevertheless, we were excited to return to our host families and our service sites, the following day. Little did we know, that we would also be returning to our homes which would be without water for two days as the government did repairs.

Masaya

Masaya, only a short bus ride outside of Managua, is home to Volcán Masaya, an active volcano which emits sulphurous gas from its peak. We took on the adventurous task of climbing up the volcanic crater. With the wind tossing us from side to side, we finally reached the summit. We felt infinite in that moment. After racing back down the volcano we were greeted by two guides who would take us into the bat caves below the volcano. We stumbled through the dark cave as our guide informed us that Sandinista soldiers would hide in the caves during the revolution in order to escape Somoza’s army. We safely made our way out of the cave and made the trip back to the barrio.
WORK HARD, PLAY HARD

Academics:
Our exciting adventures throughout Nicaragua have also been accompanied by intense classwork and reflection. We were all given a quick awakening during our first few weeks here as the classwork began to pile on. Between three days of service, classes, and homework, we are having trouble finding balance between spending time with our families and doing work. Luckily some of us have caught on quicker than others. However, with each passing day we grow more accustomed to the busy day. Our 17 credit hour schedule consists of: Culture and Society, Nicaraguan History, Spanish Language, Spanish Conversation, Academic Service Learning, Folk Dance, and Liberation Theology/Psychology. After each busy weekend, we devote two hours to discuss, reflect, and understand the prior week in our Academic Service Learning class. The noise of our host families favorite telenovelas greets us as we return home to sleep and prepare for the next day.

The University of Central America (UCA)

WE HOPE YOU HAVE ENJOYED OUR ADVENTURES SO FAR AND STAY TUNED FOR MORE TO COME!

If you would like more information on the Nicaragua Solidarity Semester contact: Dr. Irene Hodgson at h Hodgson@xavier.edu or Shannon O’Neill oneillsm@xavier.edu and this could be you next year!