

El Encaminador

Our journey here to this foreign land of Nicaragua has taken us to quite a variety of places. However, included in that list, is a venture to another country as well. By means of an eleven hour bus ride through the cities and countryside of Nicaragua and Honduras, we finally arrived in San Salvador, El Salvador. We were greeted by a sea of red-shirt wearing FMLN (the leftist party running for the presidential election on March 15th) supporters, neoliberal evidence on every street corner and an overall different attitude from that which we have witnessed here in Nicaragua.

Throughout our week in El Salvador we were lucky enough to have two guides. Our primary guide for our week was a wonderful Salvadoran woman named Rosa. She comes from a family rooted in standing up for those who have their human rights taken away from them. Rosa, an avid FMLN supporter, was extremely joyous and hopeful through the entire week and allowed us to experience that spirit of the election in a full and personal way. Our second guide for our time was Chris Ortman, an ASLS Nicaragua alum.

While we were there we lived in a kindergarten complex for the week. Our time during the day was spent visiting the historical and cultural sites associated with Romero, the Jesuits at the UCA and the demonstrations for peace in the country. It was apparent throughout our time that Oscar Romero still plays an important role in the daily lives of the people of El Salvador. Mauricio Funes, the current president-elect (thanks to the FMLN win on March 15th) refers to Romero as his role model. The Romero shirts, banners and statues all spoke to his importance in the lives of the people of El Salvador.

It would have been impossible to go to El Salvador without learning something about the civil war. In going to the sites, monuments and hearing stories the war was made a little more real for us. But what made it really come together was when we visited El Mozote, the site of a massacre that left only a sole survivor. The reality of the remaining town was enough to make us realize the horrible things that our U.S. government has participated in.

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Back: Michael Delaney, Anna Russell, Paul Madden, Josie Watson, Molly Rehak, Mary Knauff

Front: Michael Jonagan, Mary Renda, Jena Galster

Not pictured: Erika Vickers

On our last day, we had the opportunity to hear the amazing story of a man, Dani, and about his experiences as a gang member. We heard of his time in jail, as well as the work he is currently doing in an attempt to work with people in the prison system. We heard and saw later through Rosa's tears, about the amazing, peaceful movement that the prisoners had just completed. Rather than acting with violence as people expected them to, amazingly a group of 800 gang members decided to react to a violent situation with non-violent means. After a week of learning a new culture, being further challenged in our world views and eating many *pupusas* (the typical Salvadoran food), we boarded a bus to return to our families and eagerly awaited for what we hoped would be a political victory for the FMLN. Needless to say like so many other things on our trip, we were not disappointed!

Issue 3

ANNOUNCEMENTS

- Mark your calendars! May 1st at 4:00 p.m. in Kelley Auditorium– Nicaragua 2009 presentation
- For more information on the Academic Service Learning Semesters please contact Dr. Irene B. Hodgson at hodgson@xavier.edu or call 513-745-3541

Mi familia nicaragüense: The Castillo Family

Jena Galster

The rooster starts crowing and a day in the life of the Castillo family begins. My Nicaraguan family consists of twelve people, including me, who run in and out of the house throughout the day. Doña Marta is my mother and is the chief of the household. As you can imagine, caring for the lives of twelve individuals where the youngest is two-weeks old can be quite the task. There is a lot of cooking, cleaning, laundry...etc. She is one of the strongest, most hard-working women I have ever met. When her husband Manuel (my Nicaraguan father) passed away in February, she was the glue that held the family together. Her two sons and two daughters also live with her: Linet (30), Manuel (27), Raquel (22), and Ariel

(21). She also has four grandchildren who keep her busy: Nevil (11), Alicia (4), Valeria (11 months), and Iker Abel (2 weeks). There is never a dull moment in my house. I love spending my time sitting in the rocking chairs in my living room while Alicia draws in my notebook, Valeria sits on my lap trying to grab the glasses off of my face, and at the same time I am having a discussion with Doña Marta and Raquel about the happenings of my day. Raquel and I share a room and have definitely become like sisters. She is studying anesthesiology and only has one year left until she completes her degree. At least one night a week we sit down to help each other with homework. She helps me with my Spanish and I help her with her English, so it works out pretty well.

Linet and I always joke about me babysitting for her in exchange for her doing my Spanish homework. I would love to give you a full profile of every one of my family members, but I would have to take up the entire space of this newsletter. One thing that sums them up quite well is that they are all wonderful people who have worked incredibly hard for what they have. They have welcomed me with open arms into their home as a daughter, a sister, an aunt, and a friend. I look forward to sharing my life with them as well.

Doña Elba Tapia and Don Mario

Josie Watson

My house is always full of people. Out of the front of our house we run a *pulpería* (a small convenience store) as well as a cyber café, and in the back there are a few bedrooms that we rent to travelers. My mother-figure, Doña Elba, is the matriarch of the family and certainly has her hands full as there are usually nearly 15 people staying in our house.

My father-figure, Don Mario, can almost always be found at work in the kitchen making pizza which we also sell out of the *pulpería*. My conversations with Don Mario are always a surprise. They range

from serious discussions of CAFTA's affect on Nicaragua, to making fun of me for being a vegetarian and telling me I have to kill the chicken for that night's dinner.

I also have two sisters, a brother, and two nieces. My twelve-year-old niece Hazel loves to practice her English almost as much as she likes to make fun of my Spanish. My sister Elba's baby just turned a month old and is the most beautiful baby girl I have ever seen. If I ever walk into the room, and Don Mario is holding her, he will glance around the room (as if to make sure none of the women are watching him) and then sneakily

hand the baby off to me – as if no one will notice him shirking his grandfatherly duties. In addition to oh so many people, we also have a dog, a puppy, a cat and two kittens, two birds and a chicken named Cristina.

With the help of my family, my Spanish has certainly been improving, but for those times when verbal communication fails, we resort to a strange game of charades and facial expressions. Spending time talking and laughing with my family has certainly been my favorite piece of my time here.

Living the Gospels: Christian Base Community in El Salvador

Anna Russell

"We are building the earth the way that God instructed us to build it by caring for the most vulnerable and the poorest," Doña Anita told me one morning at breakfast, "We are trying to live as Christians, following in the example of Jesus." Doña Anita is a member of a Christian base community in the urban community of San Ramón in El Salvador. Drawing on inspiration from the gospels, Anita and her friends practice a theology of liberation which tries to free the people from poverty and oppression. Anita told us that many Christians "only think about the God in the clouds without thinking about the people of God all around them." With determination and passion, Anita and her friends take their faith to the streets. After seeing the vast health and education needs in their community, they endeavored to do something about it. Since 1990, they have operated five centers of nutrition and education for Salvadoran youth as well as two health clinics. To sustain these ambitious projects,

the women maintain an organic farm which supplies the nutrition centers with all their food and a guest house for delegations, such as ours, to stay in. While staying in the guest house, we had the opportunity to engage in theological and personal discussions with some of the women, learning how they had the energy to run such a huge project without government support. When I asked another woman if she ever got tired working so hard, she responded, "When I get tired I just rely on God. And then I'm not so tired." Jon Sobrino, a prominent Jesuit priest, wrote that the Salvadoran people were being actively crucified and believed in a God of life who wanted to free them from their suffering. The women of San Ramón see the God of life and try to help other people see and embrace that same God.

René Cisneros

Michael Delaney

Our service site is a very fun and interesting place. It is fun because the kids who come to eat are always full of energy and ready to play every day. It is interesting because on some days the kids find it hilarious when we don't understand what they are saying or can't understand the rules to a simple children's game. Welcome to a typical day at René Cisneros with the Michaels. We help our *educadora* (teacher) in the morning with a small daycare for children whose parents work in the morning. In doing so we help with anywhere between five and ten kids by having them color, figure out puzzles, or finish some last minute homework before their classes in the afternoon. The ages range from 2-11 years old and with such a diverse group, there's never a dull moment. One of the 2-year olds, Kendra, started out the semester crying her eyes out for her mom and has ended up loving her time with us. Seeing as how she can't talk yet she says "da" when she wants our attention, points with her lips to a game that she wants to play, and waves her finger at us when she doesn't want to do something. For a two year old who can't speak yet, using two very Nicaraguan gestures to help the adults figure out what she wants to do is pretty amazing.

The rest of our morning is filled with playing a relative of tag known as "*arriba*" with about 30 of the 150 kids who come to eat. The biggest difference between tag and *arriba* is that with tag, one merely touches the person they are chasing and that person then runs after the rest of the group. In the case of *arriba*, however, the two *gringos* are left chasing about 30 kids and have to pick up the person they are chasing and carry them to the "base" in order for them to be considered captured. Of course, this being Nicaragua, and us being *gringos*, the rules change daily (sometimes by the minute) and the "captured" period only lasts as long as the *gringos* are standing next to the base. It's not like we have any other kids to run after or anything.

After the lovely game of *arriba*, Michael and I help the women who volunteer in the kitchen to serve the kids food. This generally consists of the women making fun of both of us for not understanding something they said, to which we reply with smiles and big bursts of laughter. It goes without saying that René Cisneros has had a very positive impact on our trip here in Nicaragua and the friendships and laughter that we share will be something we will hold with us forever.

Elections in El Salvador

Mary Knauff

As the sun rose on Saturday, March 7, we arrived in San Salvador and as we slowly awakened from our eleven-hour bus ride we were bombarded with the sights of the upcoming election. The painted telephone poles, posters at every corner, and graffiti on every open wall all meshed into a sea of red and white, for FMLN, and red, white and blue, for ARENA. The streets were littered with signs reading "Vota FMLN" and "Vota ARENA" and the city was screaming as supporters from both parties took to the streets to campaign. The FMLN supporters were especially vibrant because they have suffered through twelve years of civil war and twenty years of right wing governments for a victory. Most of the polls had the FMLN ahead but the future was still fuzzy as the polls became increasingly closer in the final days of the campaigns. Hoards of international observers from across the globe flooded into the country throughout the week to assure the validity of the election. By the end of the week we were all swept into the hype and we anxiously anticipated Election Day. Finally it came, and on Sunday night, as we headed back to Nicaragua, we heard the results: Mauricio Funes, the FMLN candidate, had won. After so many years of waiting, finally, the left has a chance to run the executive office in El Salvador.

Gang Violence

As related by our Salvadoran guide, Rosa, here is a country rife with gang violence. The two main gangs, MS-13 and 18th Street both formed in the United States during the 1980s and 1990s amongst the Salvadoran immigrant communities. Today they are very well organized, extremely numerous, and always hunted by the Salvadoran government's *Mano Dura* (Hard Hand) program. More than 10,000 gang members are in jail, where until recently their fierce struggles on the outside were mirrored in captivity. Of late however, a group of prisoners calling themselves OPERA or *Optimismo-Paz-Esperanza-Renovación-Armonía* (Optimism, Peace, Hope, Renovation, Harmony) has sought to make a neutral space for discussion and creative expression within the prison walls. This group has already spearheaded several successful nonviolent protests, including a nationwide prison strike early in March of this year. OPERA is doing for prisoners what neither the gangs nor the government could do for them. They have given a voice to the outcast, value to the stigmatized, and a sense of decency and peace to people accustomed only to violence and degradation.

El Mozote

Erika Vickers

El Mozote is the site of a massacre that occurred on December 11, 1981 during El Salvador's civil war. Our group visited El Mozote during our week trip to El Salvador. The massacre was executed as part of a scorched earth policy led by the Salvadoran government and financed by the United States that was conducted in order to combat guerilla threats around this community. While at El Mozote, our group was touched by the story of the sole survivor of the massacre, Rufina, as told by her daughter Fildelia.

Fidelia took us down the path that her mother Rufina took on the day of the massacre. Rufina was forced out of her home with her three children to walk toward a nearby home, where the men, women, and children were separated. The foundations of the house that the women were made to enter still stand, along with the blood stains, and the bullet holes from the violence that ensued. Rufina escaped, hid in the minimal surrounding foliage, and laid still. She heard the screams of every single man, woman, and child of her home community, including her own family, as they were brutally murdered just a few feet in front of her. Rufina escaped by crawling on her hands and knees and hiding in the bushes until the soldiers passed and she could escape into the woods. Eventually she encountered a woman and was nursed back to health. Rufina did not let fear of the governmental authorities prevent her from sharing the truth of the atrocities she had witnessed.

Rufina spent many years recounting the story of El Mozote, venturing so far as Europe and the United States. At first, her story was dis-

regarded as false. However, when El Salvador's peace treaties were signed more than ten years later, reporters and archeologists finally went in to investigate El Mozote. The skulls of the hundreds of children and the entire adult population were quickly discovered and proved that Rufina's tale of so many years prior was true.

Today, a memorial stands in honor of the victims of El Mozote. Every child victim's name is displayed on an old church wall, surrounded by a beautifully colorful mosaic of rainbows, flowers, and stars. A gorgeous rose garden sits to the side of the church, with benches for visitors to sit and reflect. While this memorial gives testimony to the fact that the atrocities at El Mozote were in fact committed, the lives of the fallen still remain unspoken for. Neither the Salvadoran government nor the United States have ever apologized for the hundreds of innocent lives that were taken at El Mozote. This fact left our group questioning what needs to be done for governments around the world to be inspired with the courage to take responsibility for their actions and admit to the peoples of the world when there has been injustice.

Aldo Chavarria: Tragedy and Hope

Mary Renda and Erika Vickers

Aldo Chavarria is a public hospital devoted to rehabilitation of patients who have physical disabilities. Their mission is to reintegrate individuals back into society after they have experienced physically damaging accidents, such as vehicle accidents or strokes. Patients at Aldo Chavarria usually stay for about three months while progressing through various exercises such as strengthening muscles on a mat, practicing walking while holding onto bars, or using a stair-stepper or bicycle. Through physical and psychological therapy, the staff at Aldo Chavarria hopes to strengthen the bodies and motivation of the patients so that they can have more confidence in returning to their lives after devastating accidents.

While working at Aldo Chavarria, we have heard stories that have made us cry and stories that have inspired our hearts in a deep way. We met a son who was shot at a political demonstration and can no longer attend school; a dad who used to be a bus driver but suffered a stroke and can no longer work to support his family; a mom who has a three-month old baby but cannot spend time with her because she has to stay in the hospital; and a husband who fell on his head during a motorcycle accident and no longer agrees with his wife on issues that he did before the accident. We used family terminology to describe these patients because Aldo Chavarria is not just a home to these patients who stay there for three months receiving therapy, but it is also a home to their relatives who sacrifice their salaries to come and accompany their son, mother, father, or wife and help them with the exercises.

What has impacted us the most being at Aldo Chavarria is recognizing the strong power of community and hope at the hospital. It has been amazing for us to witness the support that the women and men offer each other when someone is feeling depressed when thinking about their past before their accident, about their future living with the effects of the accident, or just about the pain of the present moment. This encouragement occurs among the patients, the relatives, and the staff. It is truly an environment where an individual can enter paralyzed and depressed and leave walking and inspired with hope because of the physical and emotional support offered by all the individuals at Aldo Chavarria. During our time working there, we have been moved with sadness and cried with the patients, but we have also been inspired by the incredible strength of humanity to overcome tragedies and to struggle on with hope.

