

ASLS NICARAGUA 2011ACADEMIC SERVICE LEARNING SEMESTER
NEWSLETTER 5**FERNANDO CARDENAL—A LIFE LIVED FOR JUSTICE**

By Anna Robertson

Our group had the pleasure to meet with Fernando Cardenal, S.J., who was involved as a non-combatant in the Nicaraguan revolution and, later served as the FSLN Minister of Education and head of the Literacy Crusade. He is now director of the *Fé y Alegría* schools in Nicaragua. His sharing was frank and personal, and I think we all were moved by his story.

What most moved me was his telling of his first encounter with the poor in Colombia, where he lived in a poor neighborhood as he finished his Jesuit formation. His neighbors, who came to be his true friends, were miserably poor. When he was reassigned, he could only leave his poor friends with peace in his heart after promising that he would devote his life, wherever he might be, to fighting poverty and injustice. That promise has driven his decisions ever since as he has aimed his life toward an option for the poor, toward accompaniment.

This is what this Nicaragua experience has been about for me. For some time now I've had this idea that I would devote my life to fighting injustice. This semester, and interaction with people like Fernando, has helped me to under-



Photo by Greg Rust

stand that what's missing in my own commitment is that personal connection. How can I truly walk with the poor if they are not my friends on the same equal footing as friends from my own background?

A VISIT TO THE UNITED STATES EMBASSY BY: KATIE WIGGINS

One of our last meetings was at the United States Embassy. I was always under the impression that the primary function of embassies was to deal with passports and visas. I was wrong and now I understand better the real functions of the United States Embassy regarding immigration..

The United States Embassy is more involved with immigration issues than I ever

imagined. I was surprised to learn about the process of obtaining a visa. In order to obtain a visa a whole process, including an interview takes place. A state department worker stated, "you can tell if a person should come to the United States in thirty seconds."

After this semester I was left wondering, what would the embassy think of my Nicaraguan family in thirty seconds? Would they pass the test?

CONTENTS

Fernando Cardenal	1
US Embassy	1
Reflections	2-4
Looking Back	5
Looking Forward	6



Before I came to Nicaragua, I had a world of expectations, but I soon learned that all my expectations had to go out the window ... that I had to **experience** Nicaragua. And what experiences they were! My family, my service site, our excursions, and our classes all gave me a new perspective on the world, and I learned more than I could have ever imagined. I'll miss everyone and everything, but not as much as my huge and wonderful Nicaraguan family. I feel so blessed that I get to add ten more people to my family and know that we will remain in each others' lives!

Liza

There are only a few days left in this semester and looking back I feel just as confused as the first days here. Where has the time gone? Is it really about to be over? Of course I'm so excited to see everyone at home, yet I don't want to leave people here. I have so many conflicting feelings like these which make it hard to put this experience into words. "It was the best of times, it was the worst of times." On this trip I've laughed until my body physically hurt and I've cried to the point where I thought I didn't have any more tears. But, what I value most are all the things I have truly learned—and the images, places, and people that I could never forget. There is a difference between knowing about something and actually experiencing it. This semester was a crash course in experiencing.

Katie

The semester is coming to a close, and as much as I wish I were at home celebrating this Easter with my own family, I am so thankful that I've been granted this amazing experience. It's hard to summarize an entire semester in one paragraph, especially when that semester has taken you in so many different directions. Never did I believe that I would ever call another family's house my home. Never did I believe that I would care as much about politics as I do now. Never did I believe that a five-year-old could completely melt my heart. Never did I believe I would see live iguanas being sold in a meat market. Yet, here I am now knowing all these things to be true. If I have learned nothing else from this semester it is that nothing is quite as it seems, there is nothing ever to be feared, and that it is possible to work towards and be a part of something bigger than yourself.

Abby



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As the semester draws to a close here in Nicaragua, I am filled with an incredible mixture of feelings: excitement at the prospect of returning home, sadness at the idea of leaving my Nicaraguan family behind, stress over final assignments and papers... But there is one feeling that stands out among the rest, and that is gratitude. I am so incredibly grateful to have had this opportunity to live in and to actually experience another country, its people, its culture, and its way of life for an entire semester. Classes, service, my family, and my entire time here have given me so much, I can only hope that I can carry what I've learned here with me into the future and put it to good use in all aspects of my life, regardless of the direction my life may take.

Ryan

Nicaragua has been an experience full of various aspects. I am glad to have been able to go and live with a family there and be able to get to make the relationships I made. I never thought I would have a second family like that and I did. Being able to work at a hospital was different and I loved it. I never thought I would be able to work at a hospital rehab center, since I have always felt weird being in hospitals and never felt called to do so, but I enjoyed it and will forever hold memories of this site. Nicaragua was an interesting place to visit and get to walk around in the city and being involved in the church in Barrio La Luz allowed me to feel like I was at home and also to get to know more of the community and also the religious practices that I will have with me at all times. I am thankful for the experience and the connections.

Juan

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It is impossible to put into words the full impact and meaning of this semester. Not only were we able to learn about the history, culture, and politics of Nicaragua, we all also learned a great deal about ourselves. By spending my semester immersed with the people of Nicaragua, I feel more passionate and certain about how I want to commit to live my life, present and future. I couldn't have asked for a better family, service site, or group to make this experience all that it was for me, and I know I've learned way more the past few months than I ever could have learned just sitting in a classroom. I'm looking forward to returning to visit my family and my home in Barrio La Luz, Managua, Nicaragua.

Kayla



Unforgettable. I wish I could stop after that one word, because I have found myself at such a loss attempting to describe the semester, and how it has changed me. My last week in Nicaragua did not stray from the usual excitement of meeting new people and falling more in love with the country. I went to El Almendro with my mom, dad, and oldest sister. It is a town in the countryside of Southern Nicaragua where we stayed first in a little town, and then in the ranch house of a woman who owns almost 4,000 acres of cattle land. I was welcomed immediately with jokes and stories, and I loved the country lifestyle: from waking up at 4:00am to milk to the cows to slaughtering a cow on the high hill of La Llave to cook all day long (quite the contrast to Managua city life). It amazes me how quickly Nicaraguans accept me into their families, and I know that if I ever visit again, I will return to many open arms and doors.

Overall, I already miss everything in Nicaragua, especially my family and friends, but I am satisfied looking back at the experience. I feel pain at leaving loved ones, but excitement in sharing stories with those here in the U.S. My experience in Nicaragua will continue to influence me day by day, as I have learned and grown so much, and the incredible beauty I observed in Nicaragua will never cease to lure me there. I did not *change* as a person through this incredible semester, but I have become more confident in my views and opinions, and I will never be able to push those memories aside through each step of my life.

Brooke



Nicaragua is something I will not forget; the country has entered my heart and will probably never leave. My family there are people I hope to keep lifelong connections with as they each gave me experiences that are as valuable as I could imagine. I can't believe it's all over! It was like a time warp, taking me from January to May in what I thought was no time. Now that it's all done, hopefully I'll apply what we've learned to some good use and I look forward to going forward with a different perspective. Central America itself is no longer some isthmus suffering from unknown conflict and poverty, it is now forever part of my life, and I will strive to consider its people thoroughly in whatever endeavor follows.

Zeke



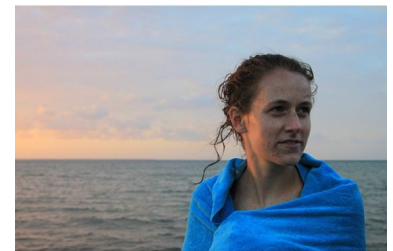
My experience in Nicaragua has provided me with a foundation for my life. Before this trip I believed many things and had many ideas, but by the end of the semester I had facts and experiences to support and/or change these beliefs. Though I do not have all the answers, I now have the critical thinking and research skills to get answers. This program has made me much sturdier in my convictions and made me feel much more prepared for my future role as a citizen of this country as well as a person in solidarity with the Nicaraguan and Central American people and others that I encounter who do not have the same privileges that I do. I hope to use all that I have learned to educate my community, and influence change in my country.

Eva

“Nicaragua is something I will never forget; the country has entered my heart and will probably never leave.”

Upon returning, I am still trying to decide how best to respond to the common question, “How was it?” ... life-changing, challenging, exhilarating, heartbreaking: how much time do you have? Early in the semester, I couldn't believe that I was finally in Nicaragua. As the semester progressed, I was increasingly surprised by how comfortable I was. I had a second home in a country so very different from my own. My family lives life with so many more little inconveniences than most North Americans - they don't have a vehicle, for example, and don't have access to running water for the majority of the day - and yet, at the root, they are such a profoundly normal family. My firsthand experiences with my family and with the people at the Olla (my service site) have taught me so much about the human family and our similarities and diversities. Going forward, I know that these insights will inform my idea of solidarity in the future.

Anna



Looking Back... by Katie

On January 17, 2011 I boarded a plane not knowing what to think or expect. Honestly, I was a bit scared, though I would have never said that out loud. Those first few days everything was uncertain. I didn't know what people were saying, I knew I would never be able to ride the bus without Martín, I got confused when it came to the timeline of the Revolution, and I was certain that I would die of heat-stroke. Now I understand Spanish, I have ridden the bus every week and never gotten lost, I can tell you all about the Revolution, and at 79° I get cold. Nicaragua has changed from that once strange place to another home. And now that I'm about to leave that home I'm realizing all the lessons it has taught me. My definitions of service, community, solidarity, social justice, empowerment, privilege, and impoverished have all changed, although I would have said I understood all of these words before. But how could I have understood? How can you know what it is like to be poor unless you live with the poor? I've experienced so many life-changing things in three-and-a-half months that I can't begin to express everything. If there's one thing that's certain, it's "the more I see the less I know." I come back to Xavier with more questions than answers and I've realized that that is okay. Rainer Maria Rilke once said, "live your questions now, and perhaps even without knowing it, you will live along some distant day into your answers." Right now that's what I plan on doing.

We Are Not Two—We Are One by Anna

In a blog entry I wrote on Christmas, I wrote that on this semester, given my opinion that the poor truly know best how to solve the problems of poverty, I hoped to begin to answer the question, "[w]here, then, does that leave me, if I am not the philanthropic foreigner offering silver platter solutions to poverty out of my wallet?" I won't lie by saying that I now know perfectly my role, but this semester has taught me so much about life and human beings. Earlier in the semester, I remember being on the bus with Abby going to work at the Olla and being overwhelmed with the feeling of being at home in a culture so entirely different from my own. From being able to call a place so novel to me as Nicaragua home, I have learned about how very different we human beings are and yet nevertheless how similar we are. From the little children who demand money from me as they force their palm-leaf grasshoppers into my hand, I have learned how both we the privileged and our poor brothers and sisters are dehumanized by poverty and the structures which reinforce it. But the most valuable lessons I have learned have been those of accompaniment. Mev Puleo wrote: "Ultimately, I believe we are most daunted by the mystery, the question, the possibility: 'It could be us.' ... I contemplate the mystery: It is us." Nicaragua has brought that mystery to life for me as I realized that these people I have grown to love are not "them." They are my people, too. They are us.



"Ultimately, I believe we are most daunted by the mystery, the possibility: 'It could be us.' ... I contemplate the mystery: it is us."

Mev Puleo



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LOOKING FORWARD BY: ANNA ROBERTSON AND KATIE WIGGINS

Before Nicaragua we felt we could easily fix and understand problems. Moving forward we take with us the knowledge that problems are so much more complicated than they seem and that if you want to fix something you have to solve a whole lot of other things, too. Furthermore, we move forward more humbly knowing that the solutions to the problems of poverty lie not in our own hands but in the hands of the poor. However, now we better understand that the tools that could empower the poor to apply their solutions are often denied them. We are convinced that in that disconnect between ability and resources lies our role in their struggles. We've been exploring ways that that role can manifest itself in the future. In our theology class, we have talked about the immigration debate and how we can be voices for the voiceless. Through clubs like Voices of Solidarity we can continue learning about Latin American issues and taking action which opts for the poor. Ultimately, as stated in "Prophets of a Future Not Our Own," (a prayer often attributed to Archbishop Oscar Romero of El Salvador but actually written by Ken Untner, S.J.): "we may never see the end results, but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker. We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs. We are prophets of a future not our own."