

SISTER CITY UPDATE

Issue 24

Richland Center-Santa Teresa Sister City Project

October 2005

LA POMA SCHOOL IN BUSINESS!

Walking to the new La Poma school

DREAMS COME TRUE

by José Marroquin, SCP Vice-president

Once upon a time the people of La Poma in Nicaragua had a meeting with a person named José. They wanted José to look at their school the way it was. They talked about so many problems. These problems to a U.S. citizen would look very inhumane. Their school was a shack with wooden walls. Parts of the roof were tin and parts were clay tile. The roof and the walls contained holes everywhere. The people talked about how the water flowed inside when the rain came. No one from the government cared about any of this; neither the Mayor nor the School Superintendent. People were hopeless.

When José returned to the U.S. he talked with his group, The Richland Center - Santa Teresa Sister City Project. **The idea was to build a better school; a school the citizens of La Poma would be proud of;** a school that would have normal walls, a normal roof, and a decent floor where the water wouldn't run under the children's feet.

José, his wife Jennie, and other members of the group started asking different organizations about how funds could be raised to build a new school. There were pictures to show, questions to answer, and items to bake. The people of St. John's Lutheran Church had a bake sale in their church and also at the Richland Country Bank. The money raised from this sale was matched by Thrivent Financial for Lutherans. And, as always, there were donations from the members of the Sister City Group, and their friends and family too. The money for the school was raised last year, so everyone began dreaming about the new school in La Poma.

In July of this year, José and other members of the Sister City group set off to Nicaragua to see the results of their efforts. In this trip, they carried school supplies, back packs, baseballs and bats. They were so lucky on the second day after they arrived when women from the community took all the heavy stuff on horses. But first, before José and his group got to La Poma, they had to trudge through rivers, battle storms from a nearby hurricane, and also deal with the heat and the high humidity.

The night before arriving at the school, everybody kept thinking, "How does that school look? Are the kids happy? Are the parents happy with the school they built for their kids?" So many questions that had to wait until the next day. Finally the day arrived and the group started walking to a field where the school was built. They were well received by the students, their two teachers and the townspeople. **The school is in a beautiful place close to several mountains, and close to Wisconsin since the State Flag was given to them.** Even though the school still needs a sidewalk, a well, and latrines, it is a beginning of a dream come true.

ZENDA'S REFLECTIONS

Zenda Shimshak is the 20-year-old granddaughter of SCP board members Jack and Maggie Lee. She resides in Madison where she attends the University of Wisconsin. Last July, she accompanied Jack, Maggie, and José Marroquin on a week-long trip to Santa Teresa.

I arrived late in Managua. My grandparents were there, waiting for me at the arrival gate. I would be spending the next ten days with them, shadowing as they worked for Richland Center's Nicaraguan Sister City, Santa Teresa.

I was unsure of what to expect that first night. Swerving between potholes and late Managua traffic, all I really desired was anything close to a bed so I could rest my head for a solid 8 hours, my personal required sleeping time. After a round of cerveza (Victoria! please, bring nothing else), some chicken and a cabbage salad that I would learn to recognize on every plate set before me here, we finally set off to find me just that. An hour later, I was sound asleep, ready for adventure to begin mañana!

Well . . . ok, day after mañana, first we took a day to vacation. Grandpa daydreamed about buying land, Grandma drank a piña colada, and I swam in the ocean, and finally at José's persistence, Lake Nicaragua.

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Zenda's Reflections, continued...

At the first meeting we attended I was immediately struck by what a handicap not knowing Spanish put me at. Not only did I become frustrated at my lack of understanding, I felt embarrassed. *What gall did I have to come here to supposedly help, and not even take the time to learn enough of the native language necessary for simple communication?* I tried to pay attention to what people were saying by concentrating on words I *did* know, and by using body language to help me, to focus on the meeting as an opportunity to improve on what little ability I had. Nonetheless, I was simply too unprepared to follow the native speech and it was not long before frustration and embarrassment were joined by boredom. It started off small, a little voice in my head whispering I'd rather be doing something else, soon though, it consumed me: *I'm going to be doing this for another week!*

I screamed mentally as my body jumped to panic mode. I couldn't help but wonder how it was my grandparents, who knew only as much Spanish as myself kept coming back to face only this.

Then we got pulled out of the meeting, and it got better. Edward, the representative from Fauna & Flora showed us his power point presentation showcasing his plan to save the area of Chococente . . . or was it all of Nicaragua? . . . Which ever, I personally was not impressed. Although it was with the best intentions, it seemed to me it was too broad, unspecific and unrealistic. And it was not inclusive of the people native to the area. The plan presented seemed to involve too much outside help coming in to "assist".

It poured rain that night. The loss of moisture during the evening however, seemed to have no effect on the following days' yet again, staggering humidity. **This I learned was the weather pattern of Nicaragua's rainy season. It would be hot and humid during the day, it would pour rain when the sun set, and in the morning it would be hot and humid beyond belief again. I loved it.**

The next few days there were more meetings which I could not understand. Some of them I sat through, some of them I didn't. Again, coming into this, I had no idea really what I was in for. When my friends at home would ask me what I was doing in Nicaragua for ten days, I literally had no answer for them. Now, through a combination of small inquires and the retelling of stories by my chaperons, I was beginning to understand a few things. From what I gathered, the Richland Center Sister City program had given aid to a small group of farmers to improve their living situation. A man named Leonidas had been hired by the Sister City to see where, and how, the money was spent, and to organize the distribution of the aid.

It became known to me also, soon enough, that not everyone is so interested in letting the people of Nicaragua keep their land. Why should *they* have it after all, when they can't farm it anyway, and the beach front property would

make excellent summer homes . . . hotels . . . etc?? And oh yes, the land is selling here. Nicaragua is in. Buy some while you can folks, already it is too expensive for my grandparents to afford, but perhaps if you work a year or too as a waiter/waitress in Costa Rica . . . I hear you can make good tips over there *(clear throat)*.

Leonidas had arranged for us to stay at a beachfront hotel. Instead we insisted on staying a night with a Chococente family, but the visit turned out to be most difficult, to the point of it being way too near impossible. Indeed if it was not for our last minute recruitment of Carlos (Carlos Martinez, agricultural technician for the SCP program), I fear we *would not* have made it. As it was, Grandpa and Grandma did so by a too thin a thread.

We were to hike through the woods a good distance to our hosts' home, in the heat of mid-day of course, for we couldn't do the journey at night. All after a goat dinner provided by Leonidas. We stayed too long at his house, and I was already nervous, knowing we had a long journey ahead of us, and the sun was set by 7 every night. I only thank the good Lord above for our guardian angel, sweet, sweet Carlos. Without him we would have been lost in the woods at the least, and giving grandpa CPR at the most. But, (with the help of a poor old horse and his owner) we made it, and the next day we traveled to see a school that was built with some of the money the Sister City had donated. **This was definitely my "high" of the trip. The smiling kids' faces warmed my heart, and I wanted to hug and kiss every one of them** as they sang songs for us, their visitors, at the end of the small ceremony. And of course, one can not forget grandma's big speech en español, bravo grandma, bravo!

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2005 PROGRESS REPORT

THE ECOLOGICAL AGRICULTURAL PROGRAM is in its third year. Forty farmers are involved. Technician Carlos Martinez has been giving workshops about organic fertilizers and natural insecticides. He has given technical advice on contour plowing to twenty producers.

The producers are happy with the increased production. The seed banks have allowed farmers to save seed for planting. The introduction of yucca production (a starchy root crop) has improved family income in all the communities.

Unfortunately several Chacocente farmers in the agricultural program have left the area after selling their land cheaply to a young American surfing entrepreneur.

THE GARDEN PROGRAM has had a hard start this season with heavy rains, disease, and poor germination. Seeds and plastic tubing have been supplied. The gardens in El Papalon and Escalante are the most successful.

THE NATURAL MEDICINE PROGRAM has seen a large effort on the part of the health promoters, especially in staffing the El Papalon/La Palma center. The women are continuing their training in medical topics, in wild plant recognition, and in establishing plant nurseries at the health centers. They meet regularly to coordinate activities and discuss issues.

We have provided funds to build a small health center in Escalante, but the project has been delayed by lack of agreement as to the site. Two families want it on their land.

THE EDUCATION AND SCHOOL MEAL PROGRAMS are doing well. Besides the major completion of the new La Poma School, school supplies were given to the students and teachers of all three schools. A small amount of money has been given to each school's parents by the Nicaraguan government to start a school meal program.

THE BEEKEEPING PROGRAM began with training where the SCP also supplied bee veils and gloves brought from Wisconsin in July. This month the 24 people in the four communities will receive their hives and breeding stock.

THE SEWING PROGRAM now involves 52 men, women, and youths from four communities. Everyone is eager to learn a skill and increase their household income.

Donations to support the work of the Sister City Project are always gratefully accepted. Contributions may be sent to our treasurer, Stein Goering, %SCP, PO Box 483, Richland Center, WI 53581

Jose Marroquin presents the Wisconsin state flag to the people of La Poma at the new school's inauguration. This flag, which once flew over the State Capitol, was given to La Poma by State Senator Dale Schultz and Richland Center Mayor Rita Kidd.

Zenda's Reflections, continued...

The return trip was also difficult, as we had to wait for hours only to learn our ride was not coming and so we should walk some more. We walked, crossing our fingers we'd cross the river before the rain came. At last a ride did finally come, offering us ten times a better view of the countryside any kind of tour bus could offer. As we entered back into Santa Teresa for the night, I think we were all happy.

As I usually am when I leave a place, I was sad in the airport. This trip had brought out the travel bug in me, I knew I wanted to keep going. I had fallen in love with backpacking, (I secretly loved our long hike into the countryside.) I am so glad I visited Nicaragua, my only regret is not knowing enough Spanish, but even that taught me. I now am determined not to visit a place without studying, at least a little, the language.

Contemplating what I had seen, I was unsure with my thoughts. Tourism would help to bring in Nicaragua more money, true. Hotels on the coast would not only provide jobs, they'd force the construction of roads, making for easier and safer travel. But in my heart of hearts, I cannot promote that for them. I just cannot support bringing tourism to such a beautiful place, not after seeing the people, and their children's smiling faces, and knowing what tourism can do.

It is their country, not ours, and I don't want to see us in tour buses down there, building McDonald's and littering our empty Pepsi bottles on the beaches. I can't wish that for Nicaragua, even if we *would* pay them for it.

Newsletter Contributors: Zenda Shimshak, Maggie Lee, José Marroquin, Jane Furchgott (writing); Charles Munch, Jane Furchgott, Stein Goering (production); Jose Marroquin, Jack Lee, Jane Furchgott, Peter Smith (photos).

La Poma health promoter Martha and family

WOMEN OF CHACOCENTE

by Maggie Lee

The women of the Chacocente Reserve are amazing to me. **With the barest necessities of a home--roof overhead, dirt floors and a fire pit in the corner for cooking, they keep their families clean, fed and happy!** I don't understand how they are able to do it. The clothes are washed by hand at the wells by the river, sometimes in the river. Yet when the children go off to school they are dressed in the whitest of shirts and blouses with shiny, happy faces.

On our last visit we were fortunate to be in Nicaragua for a training and recognition day of the Health Promoters from the Chacocente communities. This is a growing and thriving group. These women have been trained to use natural medicines for the health needs of the community. Many of the ingredients for their medications have been grown locally.

This was an important day for the Promoters. They traveled to the meeting by foot, in the back of trucks over rutted roads, and by horseback to the Chacocente MARENA Center. The mayor, vice mayor, and local officials from Santa Teresa were there to honor the women along with friends and families. Promoters from each health center presented their wares and explained how and for what they were to be used. This service to the communities meets many of the health needs making it necessary for only the most serious cases to be carried out to Santa Teresa.

When I think back to that day the picture that comes most often to my mind is the Promoters from La Poma sitting proudly on horseback in tailored suits and dresses made with the help of sewing machines and classes from the Sister City Project. They looked regal to me. I felt very humble! Such a little bit of help from us could make this difference in their lives.

BURRITO SUPPER ON OCT 28

This year's **Sister City Burrito Supper and Dance** will be held on Friday, October 28th at **Blue Highways**, 165 N Central in Richland Center. Serving will begin at 5:30. The dance, with music provided by **Kettle Creek String Band**, is scheduled for 7:30 pm.

As always, the supper will feature tortillas with a wide variety of fillings, as well as salsas and sauces, rice, and delicious homemade desserts. The price for both the supper and the dance is \$9 (children under 12, \$4), with family rates available. The meal or dance alone is \$5 (children, \$3). Volunteers are needed to donate desserts or serve at the meal. If you can help, please contact Jane Furchgott (583-2431) or Mary Bard (647-2594, bard@mwt.net).

All proceeds will benefit the Project's work for the people and environment of Santa Teresa, Nicaragua.

An El Papalon woman with her children

PEACE CORPS VOLUNTEERS GRANT

Once again we thank the Madison Returned Peace Corps Volunteers! Their \$2000 grant for 2005 is being used for the Sewing Program, Communal Gardens, the Natural Medicine Program, and the La Poma School.

Through Leonidas' liaison efforts, FFI (Fauna & Flora International, an English organization) has helped fund the SCP's new beekeeping project. The German organization DED (similar to the U.S. Peace Corps) has matched funds for our natural medicine and sewing programs.

CAMPESINO EMPOWERMENT

by Jane Furchgott, SCP President

When Maggie & Jack Lee and Jose Marroquin were in Chacocente in July, they attended a meeting of the Sister City Commission, which is made up of two representatives from each of the four project villages as well as our representative Leonidas Grijalva and the Santa Teresa mayor.

For the first time, the eight Chacocente villagers expressed a desire for the Commission to become an independent NGO (non-governmental organization) with official legal status in Nicaragua. This status would make them eligible for project money coming from sources other than the SCP. As one Commission member put it, the SCP won't be there forever -- a legalized campesino organization will be something for the future, for the children.

The Chacocente villagers said that while they had successfully reached goals with the help of our past representative Peter Smith and recently with Leonidas, now it was time to become more independent, stronger, and seek district and national recognition, especially since they now have extensive experience in making decisions together.

Since the villagers have had bad experiences with dishonest lawyers in the past, they have asked for our help in getting the NGO status. We are excited to be taking this step with the Commission. As we are not planning to employ Leonidas next year, we will start by hiring a person to train some Commission members in the financial reporting and emailing skills necessary to an independent NGO. In the future, the Commission will probably have to pay a qualified villager to do this work.

Dr. Rob Horwich, our scientific consultant, will advise us on this transition. He has worked with groups of very poor, often illiterate villagers in Belize, India, and Papua New Guinea, who have organized to successfully protect the natural resources of their areas.

We hope this independent Chacocente villagers' Commission can grow to include all seventeen communities within the Refuge and its buffer zone and become a force in local resource co-management. Within the next few months, some SCP board members will visit Santa Teresa to work with the Commission on the details of this transition.

An oxcart near the Rio Escalante.

Sea Turtle News, continued...

Female olive ridley sea turtles gather off shore for the mass nesting known as the arribada. Some local El Astillero fishermen have been killing the incoming sea turtles to extract their valuable eggs. The new patrols will monitor returning fishing boats in an attempt to stop this slaughter.

This year the SCP's conservation funds will be used for sea turtle education in Chacocente area schools. The teacher will be FFI's Jose Urteaga, a young Nicaraguan biologist who runs the leatherback hatchery at the north end of Chacocente.

Jose Urteaga(at right) with Peter Smith in 2003

In September, a new letter was sent to Nicaraguan President Bolaños, compiled by ecologist Sarah Otterstrom and me, and signed by Todd Steiner of STRP (Sea Turtle Restoration Project, also known as Turtle Island Restoration Network). The letter included a long detailed report of the critical sea turtle problems on both coasts of Nicaragua. Many organizations signed on to the letter, including, in Nicaragua, the Centro Humboldt (an environmental justice organization) and the Club of Young Environmentalists, and, elsewhere, the International Humane Society, the Caribbean Conservation Corporation, and the Nicaragua Network.

At this time, you can support the campaign and email President Bolaños by going to www.seaturtles.org and clicking on Action Alerts. If you'd like to receive a copy of the entire letter to the President, contact me at jfurchgott@yahoo.ca or call (608)583-2431.

Nicaragua is experiencing a wave of land speculation and resort building. This development is coming up the Pacific Coast from Costa Rica and has reached Tola, the municipality bordering Santa Teresa. A small corner of the Chacocente Wildlife Refuge is actually across the Escalante River in Tola. Within this corner of the Refuge, MARENA has given permission for construction of the "El Astillero Resort." Its developers have been selling lots and future buildings on the internet. The SCP, along with Sarah Otterstrom, FFI, and the Santa Teresa Alcaldia (mayor's office), have been fighting to stop this development. Besides being close enough to the olive ridley arribada beach to disturb nesting and disorient hatchlings with lights, the proposed resort would set a bad precedent for development within Chacocente Refuge. We hope it can be stopped.

Richland Center - Santa Teresa Sister City Project
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**11TH ANNUAL
BURRITO SUPPER
AND DANCE**

**Friday, Oct 28
Supper 5:30-7:30, Dance 8:00**

Blue Highways, 165 N. Central, R.C.

Tortillas, fillings, salsas, rice, desserts

**Music by the Kettle Creek Band
square & contra dance**

**Suggested Donation: \$9.00 Adults,
\$4.00 Children under 12**

All proceeds support our work in Santa Teresa

HOPE TO SEE YOU THERE

Change Service Requester



CAFE CHOCOCENTE

The SCP has teamed up with Madison-based Just Coffee to bring you Cafe Chococente. It's a dark roast of fair trade, organic, shade-grown coffee from Nicaragua's Cecocafen grower co-operative. For every bag purchased, \$1.00 will go to the Sister City Project.

Cafe Chococente is now available at Richland Center's Pine River Food Co-op, the Spring Green General Store, and the Visitors' Center of the Kickapoo Reserve in LaFarge. Other area co-ops will be carrying it soon.

It can also be purchased at Just Coffee's office, 100 S. Baldwin St., #303, Madison WI 53703, phone (608)204-9011. **Just Coffee** is a 100% fair trade coffee roaster, paying the organic growers a price above the fair trade standard

This bag of shiny coffee beans with its beautiful SCP-designed label would make a great Christmas present. Local coffee tasters give thumbs up to Cafe Chococente.

SEA TURTLE NEWS

by Jane Furchgott

We have news of progress being made in protecting Chococente's sea turtles. Through the efforts of Fauna & Flora International (FFI) and perhaps partly as a result of last fall's email letter campaign, a new head guard is in charge of the Chococente MARENA (Nicaragua's DNR) station. He promises to fight corruption.

The boat patrols, chasing fishermen from protected Chococente waters, have resumed using a larger boat belonging to MARENA. At El Astillero, the nearby fishing village, a checkpoint shed is being built that will be used by MARENA, the Nicaraguan navy, and the police.

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