

SISTER CITY UPDATE

Issue 28

Richland Center-Santa Teresa Sister City Project

Fall 2007



Derrick Gee

Cooking a Nicaraguan tortilla.

CRICKET, ANYONE

A letter from the SCP President

I knew nothing about baseball until I was about 40. That's because I grew up with cricket, in England. In the winter, some schools played soccer and others played rugby. But in the summer all the boys played cricket. The really good cricketers went on to play for their college and then their county and even their country. The not-so-good enthusiasts ended up playing for their village, on the village green. There was a break for tea-- and cucumber sandwiches. After the match (read game), everyone moved just a few feet into the village pub to celebrate victory or drown sorrows.

Village cricket pitches (read fields) were, and are, notoriously uneven. The bowler (read pitcher) might have a downhill grade in his favor and the visiting team might not know to look out for a fox hole when running for a catch (read fly ball).

Life isn't a level playing field either. The schools in northern Chicago suburbs are likely to have more resources than those on the south side. But, seven years ago, the only two schools in Chacocente, Nicaragua had dirt floors and were as much as a four mile walk from home. Many kids didn't attend because their folks couldn't afford school supplies.

Even today, school teachers travel 20 miles in the back of a truck to get to school on Monday and travel back home on Friday, their travel time cutting into their teaching time. In return, they get a salary of less than \$100 a month. After Grade 6 there's no school within reach.

With your unfailing support and the sweat of the villagers, we've made the playing field just slightly more level. Together, we've built two schools and modernized the original ones. We pay for everybody's school supplies. We monitor the attendance of both teachers and students, encouraged with a lunchtime snack. The curriculum includes environmental awareness.

But that's just a start. We're trying to add some form of secondary education. There are 17 more villages in the area that don't get any help.

Next month, you'll receive our one-and-only annual appeal letter. Over 80% of our resources come from you, our friends. Over 95% of what you send us goes straight to Nicaragua to make the playing field a little more level. You keep surprising us with your generosity. This time, hit us for six (read homer)!

Derrick Gee



Jane Furchgott

A La Chota schoolgirl.

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.

OUR 2007 PROJECTS

by Janet Gee

As you may know, each month we receive a report on project activities from Alma Susana and Marlon, the Sister City Project (SCP) facilitators in Santa Teresa. Here are some highlights to show you what SCP has been able to do this year with your financial and moral support.

Education There are a total of 116 students in grades 1-6 and 5 teachers in the three original community schools. All the students have received school supplies for the year and financial help given for the school lunch program. (This is a big incentive for the children to come to school.) The teachers were given extra teaching materials such as paper, pens, pencils, acrylic boards, and we supported area teacher training sessions. Our facilitators met with the local Ministry of Education delegate to encourage help for the rural schools. Materials were given to help with the repair of school buildings, including fencing, padlocks, paint, and water filters for wells.

Health We pay a small stipend to a local doctor to train 20 health promoters from the villages to equip them to help with simple first aid in their communities. Sessions are held one day per month. In addition, the doctor has agreed to visit each of these three remote villages once a month for medical consultations. Fourteen families each received materials to build a new latrine, five families have a new communal well. The facilitators helped with transportation during vaccination days.



Alma Susana Chavez

Latrine parts arrive in El Terrero.



Jon Bishop

Silvia Traña, SCP Commission member from El Papalon, milks her cow.

Agriculture Forty farmers are in the agriculture program. They have agreed to follow sustainable practices which are shown them by a trained technician, e.g. reduce "slash and burn", use contour farming, green fences etc. These conservation practices are to help protect the Chacocente Reserve's natural resources and also to improve the quality of life of those who live there. In exchange, the farmer receives from SCP a voucher for \$50 which can be used for any farm inputs needed.

Bees This project started late last year and now involves 20 producers who, with SCP help, have formed themselves into a co-op. They are being trained by another co-op a few miles away. The first honey harvest in January produced 40 liters and the second in April 45 liters. The honey is for family consumption and also to sell locally. SCP helped with materials for making the hives and three other local non-government organizations are helping them with a business plan.

New Communities As there are about seventeen other needy communities in the buffer zone around the Chacocente Refuge, this year SCP has begun to work on some urgent projects in two other places.

El Terrero is a very isolated community and can be cut off during the rainy season. However, before the rains came, we were able to supply the materials for twenty latrines which were quickly built by the people there. In **La Chota**, we have supplied school kits for the 60 students in grades preschool to sixth. In addition, we donated 10 well rope pumps, materials for 21 well covers, a retaining wall for the school, and money towards the school lunch program.

TURTLES & TRASH CANS

by Jane Furchgott

This year's environmental program is based on the recommendations of SCP facilitator Alma Susana Chávez. Environmental education, the leatherback sea turtle hatchery, and community clean-up were three important projects on her list.

Alma Susana (a former teacher who has worked with sea turtles) is presenting ten educational sessions focused on sea turtle conservation to the children in the four Chacocente villages, using interactive puppets to illustrate her points. Her students will also include the adult villagers who work with MARENA (Nicaragua's DNR) monitoring the olive ridley sea turtle arribadas (mass nestings).



Jane Furchgott

The leatherback hatchery, with Perla Torres, FFI technical assistant, and SCP facilitator Alma Susana Chávez.

The ugliest thing about Nicaragua, besides its poverty, is plastic trash. In the cities, where vendors sell fruit drinks in tied-off baggies, plastic bag litter carpets the streets. Outdoor trash cans are rarely to be found.

As you walk through the beautiful Chacocente forest, plastic debris is increasingly evident, especially along the stream bed ravines, often hanging from bushes at the old high-water mark. In the past, trash left around by Chacocente residents would soon biodegrade, but not so with modern plastics.

Perhaps with possible ecotourism in mind, Alma Susana has started community clean-ups -- on the beach where debris could harm the turtles and in the Refuge's ravines and communities. Trash cans have been placed near each community's school. The school children participate in the clean-ups. We are funding their materials and snacks. The children helped with a community clean-up day recently held in El Astillero, the fishing community adjacent to Chacocente Wildlife Refuge.



Jane Furchgott

Casto Vado places the new trash can in the Escalante schoolyard.



FFI

A leatherback sea turtle hatchling.

This year SCP will again be paying the Veracruz community members working at the Chacocente leatherback hatchery run by José Urteaga of FFI (Fauna and Flora International). The community members -- some of them ex-egg poachers -- have an 8-hour rotation for the 24-hour watch required. They find the nests, guard the eggs, and monitor the nest conditions in the hatchery.

Last season's hatchery results were mixed. Although more of the critically endangered leatherbacks nested at Veracruz, the hatching success was lower than in previous years, perhaps due to very hot weather during the incubation period. This coming season José plans to protect some of the nests on the beach, comparing the results with those relocated to the hatchery.

HEALTH & EDUCATION THROUGH MOTORCYCLES

by Jon Bishop

On July 24, 2007, I was able to visit our facilitators, Marlon Palacio and Alma Susana Chávez in Santa Teresa. I had only one day to discuss our projects but it was a very productive meeting and gave a good view of our projects and the management challenges. We hired both Alma and Marlon for their different and complementary skill sets. They have grown into their positions nicely, and they work well together, which has made the projects initiated since their joining the SCP very successful.

In 2007, the SCP Board made the decision to start working with communities in the buffer zone around the Chacocente Wildlife Refuge. Alma did a study of the needs and resources of several communities in this area. She recommended that we start with pilot projects in two new communities, El Terrero and La Chota. We provided funding for both projects, and both have been completed. The level of organization of the residents of El Terrero was particularly encouraging. When Marlon and Alma delivered the materials for building latrines, a team of people awaited the truck to help unload it and carry the materials to the worksites. Two weeks later on the follow-up visit to see whether construction of the latrines had begun, all of the latrines were upright. We are looking forward to increasing our support of El Terrero in 2008 because it is perhaps the poorest community in the buffer zone. Given the enthusiasm of the folks there, we hope to change that.

The most vexing problem that Marlon and Alma faced when I visited them in 2006 was transportation to Chacocente. They live in Santa Teresa, which is 18 miles from the edge of the Chacocente Wildlife Refuge. The only public transportation to the area left at noon and returned at 8 am the next day. They could get rides with FFI, another organization that worked in the Refuge, but that was quite unpredictable. They could borrow motorcycles from FFI, but if FFI needed them at the last minute, Marlon and Alma were left high and dry. Making firm commitments for meetings in the Refuge was next to impossible.

SCP's solution was to provide the down payment on a motorcycle for Marlon and Alma. Each is responsible for the monthly payment. We increased their expense allowance to cover the cost of gas. The result is that Marlon and Alma now spend three days a week in the Refuge and this has been hugely helpful to our projects.



Derrick Gee

A woman brings her baby to be examined by Dr. Quintanilla.

One project that has benefited greatly from the facilitators' increased mobility in the Refuge is the health project. We have begun funding monthly visits by Dr. Wilford Quintanilla to our communities to train health promoters and see patients. Dr. Quintanilla works at a clinic in La Pita, which is in the buffer zone and some distance from our communities. During my visit to his clinic in July, 2006, he indicated a strong interest in increasing his presence in the communities we support, but lack of transportation made it impossible. Now Dr. Quintanilla can ride on the back of Marlon's motorcycle, but during the height of the rainy season, even a motorcycle can be inadequate to get to certain communities, so then he goes on horseback. Still, Marlon can take him by motorcycle to a place where he can borrow a horse. We are very pleased to have been able to increase the access to medicine for the residents of Chacocente.

The most interesting improvement in our communities brought about by Marlon and Alma's motorcycles is in the area of education. Most teachers in the communities of Chacocente live in Santa Teresa and spend the week in the community. In the past they often did not arrive in the community in time for class on Monday and often left after class on Thursday leaving the children with only three days of school each week. With their new mobility in the reserve, Marlon and Alma started checking on the teachers in our communities to see whether they were meeting their classes on Mondays and Fridays. The SCP Board did not direct them to do this; they simply did it out of a sense of duty. The teachers who were caught out by this initially resented having to be at school five days a week. Alma worked with the teachers to improve conditions at the school and provide materials when needed. The teachers now accept their five day commitment and greatly appreciate the increased support by Marlon and Alma. The quality of primary education in the communities was sorely lacking, so we are delighted that some vigilance by Marlon and Alma with the help of their new motorcycles appears to be making a tangible difference.



Alma Susana Chávez

Santa Teresa ex-vice-mayor Jeamileth Fonseca and Mayor Cristóbal Conrado deliver SCP-funded school supplies to the La Poma school.

Much of our conversation focused on secondary education. Up to now, there has been no secondary education available to the residents of the Refuge or the buffer zone. The closest secondary school is in Santa Teresa, which is too far to travel on a daily basis. Over the last year, the SCP Board has identified secondary schooling as a priority. Carlos said that there is a new distance learning program for secondary education in place in La Chota, one of our new communities. There are 26 students enrolled. Most of them are adults who come from many different communities in the Refuge and buffer zone. Presently, all of them are in the first year (7th grade), and the modules only go through the third year (9th grade). Carlos would like to augment the modules with periodic visits by a teacher to work with the students. We are hopeful that we will be able to work with Carlos to improve access to secondary education over the next year. The excellent working relationship that Marlon and Alma have established with him in his brief tenure gives us reasons to be optimistic.

The SCP Board has begun the planning process for 2008. The four priorities are health, education, the environment and expansion of activities into the buffer zone. We feel that we got off to an excellent start on those areas in 2007 in large part due to the work of Marlon and Alma. We feel fortunate to have Marlon and Alma representing us in Santa Teresa and in the Refuge, and with your support, look forward to continuing our progress there.

We thank the **Madison Returned Peace Corps Volunteers** for their confidence and continuing support of our program. They donated \$2,000 toward water and sanitation projects in the two new communities, La Chota and El Terrero.



Jane Furchgott

Santa Teresa schoolboys

Alma, Marlon, and I met with Carlos Chávez, the new representative of the Ministry of Education in Santa Teresa. His predecessor had regularly disappointed us by lack of action to help Chacocente students. Carlos is very pleased with Alma's vigilance and support of the teachers. However, he is so new to the position that it is not yet possible to evaluate his performance, though he does seem very interested in improving the situation in the Refuge.

OUR 20TH ANNIVERSARY!

Richland Center - Santa Teresa Sister City Project
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BURRITO SUPPER & DANCE

You are warmly invited to our 13th annual benefit Burrito Supper & Dance on Friday, October 26, at Blue Highways, 165 N. Central, Richland Center.

The 5:30 Burrito Supper will feature tortillas with all the fixings, salsas, carnitas, beans, rice and homemade cakes and pies...all you can eat.

Starting at 7:30, the Kettle Creek String Band from Gays Mills will play, call, and teach old-time dance music, including squares, reels, polkas, and waltzes.

A suggested donation of \$10 per adult or \$5 per child includes both dinner and dance. If you would like to help or have questions, call Jane Furchgott at 583-2431 or Mary Bard at 647-2594.

Our SCP website is santa-teresa.wccnica.org.

All newsletters from the past couple of years are available to read online, with color photos, along with announcements of upcoming events.



A couple from La Chota.

Everyone is welcome to come to our SCP meetings, held once a month in the Pippin rooms at the Richland Hospital. Call Janet Gee at 608 588 3942 for meeting dates. Please consider becoming a SCP board member—we need your talents. **You are especially invited to attend the SCP Annual Meeting**, which will be held Wednesday, February 27, 2008. A supper at 6 pm and a slide show at 7 pm, will be followed at 8 pm by the annual report and election of officers.

Derrick Gee