

SISTER CITY UPDATE

Issue 19

Richland Center-Santa Teresa Sister City Project

April 2003

New School Opens in Rio Escalante

By Janet Gee

The New School, Rio Escalante, Chacocente Refuge January 9, 2003.

It's fiesta time and we have much to celebrate. Peter, Jane, Derrick and I have just arrived here after a busy three day hike visiting the communities supported by the Sister City Project. Several hundred people from the area have gathered to feast on chicken, beans, rice and tortillas and to view the new school which is now ready for a teacher and to hear speeches honoring the two and one half years of hard work donated by Peter Smith, the S.C.P. representative. For the children, there was an enormous piñata filled with goodies and "operated" by the Santa Teresa municipality mayor, Porfirio Cortés.

The land for the school had been donated by Escalante resident, don Julián Arteaga, the money for the materials and to pay a project overseer came from a Richland Center couple, and the hard labor of building was donated by community members. In one of the two schoolrooms, there were 45 desks and chairs, a teacher's table and chair and a chalkboard, all purchased with money given by the children of the Christ Lutheran Sunday School in Spring Green. On the chalkboard was a moving message from the Community (shown here in translation):

Welcome Ladies and Gentlemen from the Richland Center - Santa Teresa Sister City Project.
We thank you very sincerely for the support you have given to this community of Rio Escalante-Chacocente. We especially thank God for having put into your hearts the desire to help some of the poorest communities in the world, to raise the academic level of our children, to improve our diet (gardens), to develop natural medicine, to clean our water, and other things.

-Sincerely, the community of Rio Escalante

Following the festivities, Santa Teresa School Superintendent Gloria Rivas promised to find a teacher for the beginning of the school year in February, and we are delighted to report that this has now happened. The Escalante school year is now underway! This is the first school built in Escalante. In the past, only about half the children managed attend school by traveling several miles by horse or on foot to another community

Our S.C.P. is helping a total of about 200 students in the three grade schools of our project area. With the help of our supporters, we have recently donated Spanish reading books for all ages (including 46 books for the Santa



Escalante children in front of their new school building.

Teresa high school), art supplies, pencils, pens, erasers, rulers, colored pencils and bi-lingual turtle coloring books with crayons. Future plans include helping to create libraries at the schools, support with school supplies and possibly a snack for the students who are often hungry when they arrive at school.

With generous help from our friends, the S.C.P. has been able to help these extremely poor people to raise their standard of education. They have the knowledge and skills to build. All that was needed was the money for materials and some organizational help. They now have a place and a reason to come together to work, learn and plan how to improve not only their literacy rates, but also their skills at building cooperation and community for the benefit of all.



Janet Gee, shown here with a long-time Chacocente resident, was one of several Sister City Project members who visited Santa Teresa in January. The majestic ceiba trees can reach heights of more than 150 feet.

Supper & Dance Benefit Set for April 25

Don't miss the SCP's annual soup supper at Blue Highways, 165 N Central in Richland Center, on Friday, April 25. Serving begins at 5:30 with a meal of homemade soups, salad, breads, and desserts. Starting at 7:30 you can dance to the "eclectic homemade jam" offered by Tall Saul and the Astrals. Their mixture of rock, blues, reggae, funk and folk comes highly recommended by those in the know!

Suggested donation for both the supper and dance is \$7 per adult or \$4 per child. If you can't attend both events, you can take in either the meal or the dance alone for \$5 (kids \$3). Family rates are also available. All proceeds after expenses will go directly to support the work of the Sister City Project.

Assistance with meal preparation, serving, or cleanup is always appreciated. If you can help, please call Peggy Swan at 536-3993 or Bonnie Wright at 549-3081

Thought for Food

by Derrick Gee

Through discussions with the village leaders in the Chacocente refuge, we've all agreed that the top long-term priorities are health, food and education. Until now, our food program has focused on the development of micro-irrigated gardens to produce vegetables and fruit. This is adding variety to the diet and producing more food from less land. But now, we've worked together on a plan to improve the production of basic grains. This is our new "Ag Program".

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As background, most people in our villages are subsistence farmers. On hilly-to-mountainous terrain they grow corn and beans to eat and a type of sorghum to feed livestock. The farming method is, generally, "slash and burn"; that is, an area of land is cleared and burned. The ground is plowed with the help of oxen, and the crop planted. Normally, no fertilizer is applied, and, if the harvest is poor, no grain is saved for next year's seed. After about three years the land is largely exhausted and partially eroded. So, another area is cleared and the process starts again.

We have worked with village leaders and an impressive source of local technical advice, CEPA, to come up with an Ag Program that should enable the farmers of Chacocente to produce continuously from the same piece of ground and to increase output. We hope this will lead to more food and more preservation of the rare tropical dry forest which our communities call home. The program is a three-year pilot project. Thirty-five farmers have signed up for this new growing season. This is how it works:

The farmer will:

- Stop clearing and burning new areas of forest.
- Apply land conservation methods which reduce erosion such as contour strips and ditches
- Use fertilizer. Organic sources such as green manure and compost will be encouraged but simple chemical fertilizers will also be used initially
- At harvest, supply some grain to a "seed bank" for the following season.
- Continue these practices for at least three years.

The Sister city project will:

- Pay for the technical assistance.
- Provide each farmer with \$50-worth of essential materials each year for the first three years such as fertilizer, seed, tools and fencing.
- Manage a seed saving program.

The technical advisors will assist us in monitoring compliance and overall progress in this pilot project. As we make changes from what we learn, we hope to have the resources to serve more farmers, and to include a reforestation program to restore the areas no longer needed for crop production.

This new program is a financial gamble for the Sister City project. We only have about \$3000 of the \$5000 it will cost this year. But, this project seems so worthwhile that we've gone ahead, trusting that the extra \$2000 will appear from somewhere. If you can help, we'd really appreciate it. Checks, marked "Ag Program" and payable to "Santa Teresa Sister City Project" can be sent to our treasurer, Emil Haney, at UW Richland Campus, Hwy 14W, Richland Center, WI 53581.

Seeing the Chacocente Projects

by Jane Furchgott

It was a pleasure walking along the wide stream bed in the Chacocente Forest with La Poma community leader Ramiro Medrano and gardening specialist Carlito Gonzales. It was the beginning of the dry season and the woods were still green. The two men showed me animals and birds that I would have missed and answered my questions about the native dry forest trees. Peter Smith had arranged this special Chacocente hiking tour for Janet and Derrick Gee and me during our visit to Nicaragua in January.

Another highlight of our progress through the forest was seeing the wells funded by our Sister City Project (SCP). In 2002 fifteen new wells were dug by the communities and three old wells improved. It was exciting to suddenly come upon a well being used in the middle of the forest, with a shower stall or reforestation seedling enclosure

nearby. I was impressed at how easily and quickly the new rope pumps drew a good flow of water.

We visited community gardens in La Poma and Escalante. The gardeners showed us the SCP-funded micro-irrigation systems that made these gardens viable during a good part of the six-month dry season. Water is pumped by hand into a large raised plastic tank. From the tank, plastic hoses extend into the garden. Each individual tomato, pepper, melon, or squash plant is growing in its own fertilized hole, about 10 inches across and a few inches lower than the surrounding garden. This helps collect and retain water. By each plant, the hose is pierced with a drywall screw. Adjusting the screw gives the plant the proper flow of drip irrigation.

Other vegetables grown there are onions, carrots, and cabbage. Compared to Wisconsin, Nicaraguan gardening is very difficult. Without a killing winter frost, insect problems can be severe, especially during the rainy season.

Further along in our hike we reached the La Palma-El Papalon Health Center. In our honor, the approach was marked with whitewashed stones along both sides of the path and paper chains on the building's porch. There we met the health promoters, eight women who continue to be trained in natural healing. They showed us their herbal remedies, including soaps, salves, syrups, tinctures, and teas made from herbs grown in the community gardens and from plants and trees native to the Chacocente forest.

In each village, the people introduced the members of their *directiva* or community officers. With Peter's encouragement, all four communities held elections last December to elect new officers. I appreciated the villagers' intelligence, energy, and community spirit.

The Sister City Project is now working with a larger representative body which has replaced the Chacocente Association. I attended the first meeting of this Commission where we ratified an agreement outlining the details of our SCP's relationship with them. This Commission is made up of Mayor Porfirio Cortes, our representative Leonidas Grijalva, and two representatives from each of the four participating rural communities. Coming to decisions by consensus, they will be making proposals for the projects we fund and overseeing the projects and finances.

The structure of this Commission was the creative idea of our former representative, Peter Smith. We are also indebted to Peter's vision and hard work for accomplishing all the development projects for the Chacocente villages. I hope we can help these seeds of sustainability grow and flourish for Chacocente's people and wildlife in the coming years.



Two of the health promoters at the La Palma-El Papalon Health Center

Reflections On 2 1/2 Years In Santa Teresa

by Peter Smith

My time in Nicaragua was one of the most satisfying and rewarding experiences of my life. Initially I had no idea how it would work out, but I wanted to go because, as a Viet Nam veteran, I wanted to pay back my debt to the Third World.

In the Viet Nam War, I had directly experienced how brutally my country pursued its economic and military policies. Now I had a chance to help little Nicaragua, the second poorest country in the Americas, which endured the US-sponsored Contra War and was never paid the \$15 billion we owed it in damages.

Furthermore, as a farmer for thirty years, I related to the campesinos (peasant farmers) and their way of life. Too much foreign aid promotes programs, such as tourism, that reflect the values of the donors more than the needs and yearnings of the campesinos. Even though the agricultural way of life is dying out in the US, I think most small farmers want to keep farming if they possibly can. Something about dealing with animals, plants, soil, and weather, while raising a family, makes life satisfying and often beautiful, even in the face of the accompanying frustrations and physical demands. Besides, farming puts food on tables in Nicaragua, where there is over 50% unemployment.

In Santa Teresa I tried to tap into the campesinos' natural yearning to continue farming. That's why I promoted wells, irrigation systems, family and community gardens, orchards, soil conservation, green manures, etc. The campesinos wanted all these things but needed technical and financial assistance to put them in practice. These are families for whom a plastic bucket, strong rope, and a pulley to haul water out of the well are prized possessions. In such circumstances, a little help goes a long way.

I also encouraged community organization and cooperation. Poverty puts a lot of stress on personal, family, and community relations, which in turn leads to breakdown of normal cooperation among struggling people. While, in my experience, poor people tend to be very generous, helpful, and cooperative, more so than the rich, this is not something that just happens but something that needs to be constantly noted, encouraged, and helped over the bumps caused by poverty.

Giving encouragement was part of my role as facilitator. I found satisfaction not only in seeing the physical changes of wells and gardens but in sensing the empowerment that came with organized community cooperation. Now, the survival of the gardens and organizations depends on continuation of the Sister City Project and its maintenance of what we have started.

A final thought: after two and a half years in Nicaragua and my experience in Viet Nam, I'm convinced that poverty is not an accident or just bad luck on the part of Third World countries. Rather it's an inevitable outgrowth of an economic, political, and military system which strives to perpetuate and expand its privileges and power. Organizations like the Richland Center Sister City Project should certainly be supported. But people of good will and conscience should also look to wider horizons and more profound possibilities. The world can't long endure the degree of inequality and injustice we are witnessing today.



Rope pump in use at the La Poma well.

Sea Turtle News

by Jane Furchgott

For the first time I was able to see baby olive ridley turtles hatching at Chacocente. It's an amazing sight. The sand above their nest starts moving, and all of a sudden baby turtles begin boiling together to the surface. The little black turtles, only three inches long, pause a moment to adjust to the new situation and instinctively head for the ocean. Hundreds of tiny turtles were swarming down the beach. I had to watch my steps as I walked along.

Mayela Reyes, the new head of the MARENA guard station at Chacocente, was with me. MARENA is the Nicaraguan DNR. Mayela is the young Nicaraguan biologist replacing Ronald Vega, the former director, who was accused of egg trafficking in Peter Smith's well-researched report on this illegal activity.

According to Mayela, the number of olive ridley sea turtles laying eggs this current season (7/02 to 1/03) was 28,000, the same as last year's total. This is good news, since the number had declined by 10% in each of the last three years.

Mayela and Peter reported that patrols by the turtle protection boat have greatly reduced the number of dead adult turtles washing up on shore after drowning in fishermen's nets or being killed for the eggs they carry. (The patrol boat is a cooperative effort our group, MARENA, the Santa Teresa Municipality, the Nicaraguan Army, and a big landowner.) The crew of the boat, named "Hermandad Wisconsin," patrols the Chacocente Wildlife Refuge's waters regularly to chase away fishermen and confiscate their nets.

Peter and I also visited the leatherback sea turtle hatchery at the north end of the Chacocente beach. The project is run by Jose Urteaga, a young Argentinian biologist from the organization Fauna & Flora. Although the hatchery was doing well, all its thirteen nests were dug by the same 4 or 5 female leatherbacks. This is a sign of the drastic decline in leatherbacks throughout the Pacific Ocean, where it is feared that leatherbacks could disappear by 2015.

Nicaragua Travel Notes: Person-to-person contacts have always played an important role in the work of the SCP. Many Richland area persons have visited Santa Teresa over the past 15 years, either on their own or as part of a Project delegation. It should be noted that these individuals have always paid their own travel expenses. On rare occasions, special funds were raised to assist someone who could otherwise not have otherwise afforded to go. None of the money for US travelers has come from the regular SCP budget. Incidentally, there are tentative plans to organize an SCP delegation to Santa Teresa later this year. Anyone who might have an interest in participating is encouraged to call Jane Furchgott at 608-583-2431.

Richland Center - Santa Teresa Sister City Project
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SISTER CITY BENEFIT SOUP SUPPER AND DANCE

**Music by Tall Saul and the Astrals
"Eclectic Homemade Jam"**

**Friday, April 25th, 2003
Supper at 5:30 PM
Music starts at 7:30
\$7 (kids \$4)**

**Blue Highways
165 N. Central
Richland Center, WI**

All proceeds support our work in Santa Teresa

What A Beautiful Life !!

El Salvador native and SCP member José Marroquin recently returned from Santa Teresa.

It was the 30th of March when I began my adventures at my expense. First stop was Managua, a noisy city, lots of pollution. The next day via taxi, I went to our Richland Center's Sister City, Santa Teresa.

I met with our Representative Leonides and we discussed the agenda for the week. I never thought I could work so hard on my so-called vacation. But there were some things that needed attention, problems to be solved and I was really looking forward to do this for the benefit of the less privileged: people in the country -side.

Here I was taking a little taxi, a 1974 Toyota type car, that deserved to be in the junk yard, but the driver said it had a good engine and would withstand the terrain. We went up the road, down rocky paths, through gullies, bracing myself and finally made it to La Chota, a small community with a real bad school. It had dirt floors, two cramped rooms, and no room for the students to move. It made me so sad to see this, especially when I thought of the schools in the United States. What a shame!! But this is all they have. Plus teachers must love to teach because they are there for the whole week in the village and don't get to go home until Friday.

All this time I was carrying two suitcases weighing 70 pounds each. Also I had my back pack. These suitcases were filled with dental supplies, tooth brushes, and tooth paste donated by Richland Center's Dental Association and from Dr. Terry Moen's Office. Also weighing down the suitcases were hundreds of pencils that were given by State Farm Insurance and the Richland County Bank. Other items carried were notebooks, rulers, pens, and various school supplies from my wife, Jennie, and me.

Since there was no other way of transportation, because the road ended in La Chota, we hired a man and his horse to carry the suitcases up the mountain. It was a nice and peaceful walk. Later that day we stopped at Ramiro Medrano's house in the community of La Poma. This is where we spent the night. We visited the school, which was in the same situation as the other.

While visiting with students, we distributed some of the supplies we had. Each student received a tooth brush, paste, and pencils. In total, we visited four schools and distributed everything among them. Included was one school--Escalante--that the Sister City built in 2002 with donated money from a good hearted family.

One morning while talking with my friends, we were surprised with a visit from a Howler Monkey that was creeping across the yard. I ran inside the house to get my camera and carefully without interfering, I took a picture of the monkey while he was climbing a nearby tree definitely keeping an eye on me. What a moment for anyone to experience.

There were several moments of being in touch with nature. Other times were at night when the stars shown bright, with no street light. A clean sky. . During the day, where no cars can go, we ran into several troops of Howler Monkeys and different types of birds. You can even see the Parrots chatting in the trees above you.

I know it's a hard life that the people face. They don't say it, but I can feel it. Sometimes I wonder how they survive in those Mountains far away from everything.

But this is their world: A world of Peace, A world of Innocence, A world of Nature, suffering and Hope. I certainly hope people like you or me can do something to lessen their suffering.

Sometimes I wish people could go there and see with their own eyes the problems that these people confront every day. But also enjoy the friendliness that I experienced. There is no better thing in this life than making real friends and helping them in times of need. So that is what a Wonderful Life is!!

Just minding our own business, taking a shower from a well, you can hear the Parrots talking among themselves or the monkeys making noises. All these sounds makes this place Unique.

We know times are hard for people in the US, but let's not forget still how lucky we are. Your small or big donation is greatly needed and appreciated in helping the less fortunate. All donations go directly for projects. We have almost no administrative fees.

Sincerely, -- José A. Marroquin

Thanks to those who contributed to this issue:

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