

SISTER CITY UPDATE

Issue 27

Richland Center-Santa Teresa Sister City Project

Spring 2007

TWENTY YEARS OF HOPE

This year our Richland Center – Santa Teresa Sister City Project is 20 years old!! Our relationship with Santa Teresa has survived the political ups and downs in both countries to remain Wisconsin's most active Nicaragua Sister City connection. Here's the beginning of our story.

OUR FIRST TEN YEARS

by Jane Furchgott

In 1979, Nicaraguans overthrew their president, Anastasio Somoza, the last of a dictatorial dynasty. The new socialist Sandinista government that followed was perceived as a cold war threat by President Reagan, who reacted by mining Nicaraguan harbors, setting up a trade embargo, and illegally funding the Contras, a guerrilla force working against the Sandinista government.

The destruction and atrocities of the Contras were frequently reported in the news. The Richland Citizens for Peace and Justice decided to take positive and friendly action in support of the Nicaraguan people.

With the help of the Wisconsin Coordinating Council on Nicaragua the group wrote to the Nicaraguan Embassy requesting a sister city for Richland Center. Wisconsin and Nicaragua had been sister states ever since Kennedy's Alliance for Progress in the 1960s.

In January 1987, the Embassy sent a letter twinning Richland Center with Santa Teresa. The cities were similar in size, about five thousand people, each the seat of a larger municipal agricultural area.

The new Sister City Project (SCP) focused on friendship, information, and aid. There was much interest in sending material aid to Santa Teresa. Drives were held to collect medicines, school supplies, and clothing, which were shipped to embargoed Nicaragua through a Christian ecumenical organization. In the late 80s, the project raised money for desks in Santa Teresa's primary school, for additional high school classrooms, and for the roof of the new pre-school.

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This well brings clean water to an extended family in the Escalante community

NEW HORIZONS

by Derrick Gee, new SCP President

Every month, come winter snow or summer mosquitoes, the all-volunteer board of our Project converges on the basement of the library in Richland Center. There, we huddle to tackle the issues of the day. We review the emails from our Project facilitators in Nicaragua, the proposals for school supplies or metal for latrines or more sewing machines or training for health workers or a guard for a turtle hatchery. We figure out how to raise more funds and how to get the information into this newsletter. But occasionally, too, we need to look at the big picture. What have we achieved? Where are we headed? How are we stacking up against our mission?

It is five years since we wrote our strategic plan to guide us in our work in the Santa Teresa villages. Probably, we have let it accumulate more dust than we should have and we will be putting that right this year. But, in the meantime, our work is evolving based on our cumulative experience with the Nicaraguans we serve. This has resulted in some changes that, with their support, we are now implementing:

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New Horizons, continued...

• **Target communities.** For seven years, we have been focusing our efforts on the people and the environment in four villages in the Chacocente Wildlife Refuge- La Palma, El Papalon, Escalante and La Poma. In that time, there have been changes there. We can certainly claim to have “helped people to help themselves” so that they now have better education, health and a few ways of creating income that have less adverse impact on the delicate ecosystem within which they subsist. But, the human population has declined, largely due to outside investors offering to buy out the small farmers. This cash has enabled them to move to areas where it is easier to farm or to totally new lives elsewhere. Meanwhile, there are about 15 other communities in the designated “Buffer Zone” around the Refuge where people have not been getting the help that we have supplied and where the population may be increasing. So, in 2006, one of our facilitators, Alma Susana, carried out a survey of these communities. We have committed to begin working in two of these this year. La Chota is on the edge of the Refuge and a place that has wanted us to work with them for some time. El Terrero is a very poor community in a remote part of the buffer zone. Village representatives have met with Alma and her co-worker, Marlon, to produce a list of priorities, and we have allocated some of our funds to get started. We are committed to continue working in the original communities but in a narrower range of activities than before.

• **Priority activities.** Over the years we have continued to add new activities as the needs arose. In addition to looking out for the sea turtles and the forest, there have been wells, gardens, latrines, schools, health workers, sewing classes, a honey project and ag conservation and many more. It’s a lot to manage on relatively little cash and a very slim administrative structure. Other organizations, particularly from Europe, are now working in Chacocente and we have cooperated with them recently in joint projects such as beekeeping. They are also working with the Chacocente villagers on an income-generating eco-tourism program. In reviewing these changes, we have concluded that we should concentrate most of our effort on the most basic infrastructural needs of the people, an area where no other outside bodies are working. These needs are health and education. Without at least a minimal standard in these, we cannot expect the communities



The working team in front of the Santa Teresa Mayor's office: Mayor Cristobal Conrado, Derrick Gee, Vice-mayor Yamileth Fonseca, Treasurer Ivan Dinarte, SCP facilitators Alma Susana Chávez and Marlon Palacio

to be ready to tackle the wider world, whether that world is coming to them in Chacocente or whether they are moving on to a different life elsewhere in Nicaragua. Again, we don't plan to drop efforts in other areas where the quality of life can be improved significantly with just a little “jump-start” from us, such as sewing, but we hope that these enterprises become self-sustaining.

Of course, our concern for this rare ecosystem with which we are involved will also ensure that our environmental support continues

• **Administration.** Out two young facilitators, Alma and Marlon have been with us just over a year now. We are delighted with how they have tackled a very difficult job, ensuring that we know the will of the people and that they all understand the limits to what we can do and what they must do for themselves. They have had big transport problems in these remote areas. Whereas larger aid organizations might spend funds on first-world employees driving SUVs, we have just reached an arrangement with Alma and Marlon whereby we will help them buy motorcycles to get around better. Our long-time friend and now vice-mayor of Santa Teresa, Yamileth Fonseca, knows them well and has agreed to be their local mentor using her lifelong experience of working with the poor.

So, our strategy and its implementation are evolving to meet the changing circumstances. We are delighted that the generosity of you, our supporters, appears to know no bounds. We will be spending almost \$28,000 of your money in Nicaragua this year, by far our biggest effort.

Our First Ten Years, continued...

Informing and educating people in Richland Center about Nicaragua and Central America was a big part of the SCP's early efforts. We sponsored Nicaraguan speakers, U.S. speakers who had visited Nicaragua's war zone with Witness for Peace, and speakers on the war in El Salvador. We encouraged people to write letters to Congress to end aid for the Contras and the death squad regime in El Salvador. One Salvadoran refugee who spoke is now the SCP's vice president.

Efforts at friendship began with letters and pictures received from Santa Teresa children and solidified with our visits to Santa Teresa. Kathie Swanson from Rockbridge was our first traveler to Santa Teresa in 1988. I took my first trip there in 1989, armed with the present tense of Spanish, which I had learned in the weekly Spanish night class at the Richland campus set up at the SCP's request.



1989 – Jane Furchgott presents a book of photos and letters from Richland Center people to Santa Teresa mayor Luis Palacios.

Some knowledgeable people think that the active sister city friendship movement of the 1980's helped prevent a possible U.S. invasion of Nicaragua.

Santa Teresa mayor Luis Palacios asked us to send an observer to the 1990 national elections, which were under world scrutiny as to fairness. Our first of many benefit dinners and dances raised money to send librarian Tom Bachman to observe Santa Teresa's elections. In a surprise upset, conservative Violeta Chamorro defeated Sandinista incumbent Daniel Ortega.

In late 1990 ex-president Ortega was scheduled to visit Richland Center as part of a U.S. tour. A week before the planned visit, the Gulf War broke out and Ortega canceled his tour. Public interest in Nicaragua

evaporated with the shock of the new war. 1991 was the low point of public involvement in the Sister City Project.

But we didn't give up. In 1992 we raised money to bring Jader Castro, a rural health educator at the Santa Teresa Health Center, to Richland Center for three weeks. He talked to local health care people and stayed with families. Jader emphasized the need for clean water as the top health priority in rural Santa Teresa.

In the 1990s, the SCP concentrated on raising money for rural health, working with Jader and the Health Center. We raised money for wells, latrines, health volunteer training, and health care books for the rural clinics.

In 1995, SCP member Neil Bard took Richland Center mayor Tom McCarthy with him to Santa Teresa. On their return, the Richland Center City Council gave Santa Teresa official sister city status. Dr. Bard began the tradition of carrying a suitcase of basic medicines to Santa Teresa as part of our luggage.

In 1997, Neil Bard received a passionate letter from Santa Teresa mayor José Martínez requesting our help protecting the sea turtles and aiding the poor villages of the Chacocente Wildlife Refuge, at the south end of the Santa Teresa municipality. We had never even heard of this refuge before. How could we help??

To be continued in the next issue.....



Elba Álvarez from La Palma, Chacocente



Silvia Traña, new Commission member

NEW FACES ON THE COMMISSION

The Chacocente Sister City Commission is a group of villagers representing the communities working with the SCP. Organized by Peter Smith before he left Nicaragua in 2003, the Commission is the body that decides on the projects to be accomplished each year, makes a budget proposal, and sees that the projects are carried out in their villages. It includes two representatives from each village and the mayor of Santa Teresa. Our facilitators are advisors, but not voting members.

New Commission elections were held in January in special village assemblies in El Papalon, La Poma, and Escalante. Although all the former Commission members ran for election, most were defeated by new candidates. We encouraged women to run as well as men, and now there are two women on the Commission.



A light moment at a Commission meeting

SEEING NICARAGUA'S ELECTIONS

by Jane Furchgott

José Marroquin and I arrived in Santa Teresa the evening before Nicaragua's 2006 national elections. Getting up the next morning, Sunday, November 5, and walking around town, we saw long lines of people waiting to vote at various polling places. The voting looked orderly, and there were a number of foreign election observers watching the process.

By that evening, it was clear that the leading candidates in the field were ex-President Daniel Ortega, from the socialist Sandinista party, and U.S. Government-supported Eduardo Montealegre, from the center right ALN party. Neither had yet received the necessary margin (35% of the vote, with 5% over the runner-up) required by Nicaraguan law to win the election. If the margin was not attained, there would be a run-off election between the two men.

It took almost three days for all the votes to be counted and Daniel Ortega to be declared the winner; but the celebration started the first night. Fireworks were set off all over town, and car caravans of young people with red and black FSLN flags cruised Santa Teresa's streets. It looked like a real Sandinista town, the enthusiasm was so evident.

Ortega won with 38% of the vote, in an election certified by the Carter Center. Jimmy Carter described the election as a "much more careful and meticulous process and much more uniform throughout the country than anything we've seen in the United States." The final results came in along with news of the U.S. elections back home. Despite mixed feeling about Daniel Ortega, José and I were happy about his victory. Santa Teresa's ex-mayor José Martínez also won re-election as the Carazo department's representative in the national Congress. A few days after the election, he showed up at the house where we were staying with a couple of six-packs and a bodyguard, still celebrating.

President Ortega, who ran with a promise of peace and reconciliation, is now in the difficult position of balancing and sustaining national and international alliances that will benefit Nicaragua. He is trying to maintain a good relationship with the U.S. while forming close ties with Venezuela's Hugo Chávez and Latin America's other socialist regimes. Oil-rich Venezuela will be giving Nicaragua a special deal on oil along with other aid.

My hope is that the Sandinistas will keep their socialist promise to improve Nicaragua's health care and education systems, both of which have worsened in the past three administrations. This is something that would improve the lives of our many friends in Santa Teresa and the Chacocente villages.

SEA TURTLE NEWS

by Jane Furchgott

Last November José Marroquin and I visited the MARENA (Nicaragua's DNR) station at Chacocente's sea turtle arribada (mass nesting) beach. We talked with the head guard, Paulo Flores, who told us that, in general, the turtle protection had improved.

A large pile of fishing nets filled up one corner of the porch. These were nets confiscated in Chacocente waters, waiting to be reclaimed by the fishermen who owned them. The new naval checkpoint at El Astillero is working, and the MARENA boat is making regular patrols to confiscate illegally set nets. Paulo said a checkpoint at Casares, another fishing town north of Chacocente, is also needed. These checkpoints help deter fishermen from bringing in eggs that were obtained from sea turtles killed at sea.

We asked Paulo about the rumors we had heard concerning violence at the beach during the past month. He told us the story, exemplifying the tense relations between MARENA and the local fishermen. During the October arribada, a soldier had shot a young egg poacher in the leg. The Astillero community got mad and chased away the ten MARENA guards and soldiers at the station, taking many of the eggs from the arribada even though they were already too old to sell. "We were way outnumbered -- we had to run", said Paulo, unapologetically. He had requested twenty soldiers for the next arribada.

Occurring during our visit, that arribada went well, with 3500 olive ridley turtles nesting on its first night. Their numbers are up a little from last year.

The government ban on taking sea turtle eggs is still in effect. A well-known egg trafficker from Chacocente's Veracruz community received a one-year jail sentence.

José and I also visited the leatherback sea turtle hatchery near Veracruz. We talked with FFI's José



Jose Urteaga telling SCP vice-president Jose Marroquin about the leatherback hatchery

Urteaga, who has successfully run this hatchery for four years, working with the egg poachers in this unprotected part of the beach to find and sell him all leatherback eggs. Local people, some former egg poachers, are also hired to help protect and run the hatchery. This January the SCP gave José Urteaga money to hire a person from Veracruz to work at the hatchery for three months. Forty-five nests were saved at the hatchery this season.

Chacocente's small leatherback population is important because of the Pacific leatherback's precipitous decline in the last decade. On a hopeful note, the leatherback population in the east Pacific seems to have stabilized at the current very low numbers. José Urteaga told us that two other nesting areas, each about as large as Chacocente's, have been found in Nicaragua.



Washing clothes in a cement sink near a Chacocente well. Clothes will be hung up to dry on a barbed wire fence.

CHACOCENTE REVISITED

by Janet Gee

Derrick and I were in Santa Teresa in January 2006 when we interviewed Alma Susana Chávez and Marlon Palacio Morales, two local graduates who were interested in becoming facilitators for the Sister City Project. Since the Board appointed them in February 2006, as part-time project organizers and developers, we have been in regular email contact with them as SCP and they worked on existing programs and initiated new ideas to support the villages of the impoverished Chacocente Wildlife Refuge. Alma's training had been focused on environmental issues while Marlon's background was agricultural development. They were both anxious to use their local knowledge and skills to improve the social, health and educational conditions in the area.



SCP facilitator Alma Susana in the patio of her family's Santa Teresa home.

Our return visit this January one year later, was rewarding because we could see clearly how our facilitators have developed in confidence and in knowledge of the conditions faced in the communities. During our visits with them, we could see how they are respected and have organized the work to educate and enable the villagers to help themselves.

Our visit included a meeting with Doctor Quintanilla who works out of a clinic in La Pita, a community some 30 to 60 minutes by motorcycle from the Refuge communities we help. Although the Ministry of Health has provided him with a clinic, he is mainly funded by a European source.



Dr. Quintanilla examines an unwilling patient.

For a monthly stipend from us, he has begun to train volunteer community members in basic health care, midwifery and birth control. In addition, he will visit each community once a month to see those patients unable to walk or ride a horse to visit his clinic. We will also pay something to reduce the cost of the medications needed in the villages. In his training program, he will include knowledge of natural as well as "modern" medicines and we hope that many of the health promoters from our natural medicine programs will receive this training from the Doctor. In this way, there will be a three-way partnership - professional expertise from the Doctor, volunteer and self-help from the communities, and economic support from you, the SCP donors.

In Education, with your donations, we have continued to provide school supplies for all the students in the village schools. This is a very real need for the families who generally live on less than \$1 a day. We are also giving financial help for a school meal program which is an added incentive to attend school. Families have asked us to help them provide post sixth grade education in their areas. At present, those who have the ability and desire to continue on have great financial and logistical problems with doing this. During a recent trip to Mexico, Derrick and I saw "Telesecundaria", a distance learning high school program in action. Later, at the Ministry of Education in Managua, we discussed the possibility of introducing this into the Chacocente area. We learned that they had already piloted the program but felt it was inappropriate for their national situation. However, there are other possibilities and the Ortega government is talking about making

rural education a priority. Marlon and Alma will continue to monitor this situation and we have put money aside for secondary education to use when the situation becomes clearer. We believe that with the SCP presence in the area and regular meetings with the local Ministry of Education representative, we can continue to raise awareness about the need to provide good teaching and accountability in places that are often overlooked. By helping to build schools, providing schools supplies, monitoring the teaching, and encouraging families to send their children to school, we can offer more possibilities to the young people of the area.

We continue to support the sewing and agricultural projects. Sewing will probably not be a significant income generator for the families because of the cheap imports and used clothing in the local markets. However, it is a popular activity and it also forms a useful part of subsistence living and personal growth and pride. We plan to continue the agricultural program, at least until we have fulfilled our obligations to those in our current three-year project, because there are valuable environmental, health and educational benefits. Producers outside the project can now see the advantages of not slashing and burning as well as the benefits of contour farming and the use of green manures.



The first honey harvest: uncapping the comb before extracting honey



Chacocente farmers at an agriculture workshop making large triangular levels used to plot contour lines in their hilly fields.

A highlight of the visit was witnessing the first honey harvest carried out by the new Beekeeping Co-op. SCP had financed this project together with Fauna and Flora International (FFI), a UK based environmental organization. The members were very excited about the results, and they should now be able to develop the project from within by building their own hives and creating their own bee colonies. We will help with a little funding and Marlon will monitor progress. It is hoped this will become an income producing business with marketing being done in coordination with another regional co-op.

Wherever we traveled in the town of Santa Teresa or the Chacocente Reserve, we were warmly greeted and thanked for our support. SCP does not have the enormous financial resources of an international U.N. backed organization, but we do have a twenty year track record, the trust of the Santa Teresa Mayor's office and of the communities we support. They trust us to do what we promise in the name of all of you who donate to this venture, Your interest and support is very much appreciated and needed. On behalf of the municipality of Santa Teresa de Carazo, we thank you.

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.

Newsletter contributors: Derrick and Janet Gee, Jane Furchgott, Maggie Lee (writing); Joe Swanson, Jane Furchgott, Charles Munch (production); Jane Furchgott, Derrick and Janet Gee, Liz Chilsen (photos)

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In the new La Poma school.

Change Service Requested

SPRING FLING!

Come join us at Jack and Margaret Lee's farm at 11640 Tunnelville Rd., La Farge, WI, on Saturday, May 12, 2007 for a day of fun, friendship and learning. The meal features great hamburgers from the Lee's own grassfed longhorn cattle, brats, homemade desserts, Nicaraguan gallo pinto, and the "brew canoe".

- 2 pm: WATER QUALITY MONITORING DEMONSTRATION will be presented at the nearby Kickapoo River. Gary Thompson and Terry Beck of Valley Stewardship will be discussing the process and the benefits to the community.
- 3 pm on: MEAL served. Meal \$7.50, Beer \$2.00, Water/Soda \$1.00
- 4 pm: BIRD WALK guided by Barb Duerksen, accompanied by Maggie Jones, who will be pointing out invasive species and the effects they have on our local ecology.

This year SCP has added two new Santa Teresa villages to our project. The money raised from this event will support well and latrine projects for clean water in the new communities, as well as the ongoing work in established villages.



Francisca cooking in her El Papalon kitchen