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Breaking out of the Bubble

Abstract

clearly remember shivering while rapidly walking across the stage at graduation last May amidst relentless rain, bolts of lightning, and cracks of thunder. As I grasped my hard-earned diploma and smiled genuinely for the camera, I felt prepared to leave for Nicaragua as a Peace Corps volunteer in a few months. Much like my stormy graduation ceremony, my experience as a Peace Corps volunteer in Nicaragua has presented some challenges and is not exactly as I expected, but nonetheless, it has been interesting, and at the end of the day, I feel grateful to be here.

Breaking Out of the Bubble

Alexis Manning (2004)

I clearly remember shivering while rapidly walking across the stage at graduation last May amidst relentless rain, bolts of lightning, and cracks of thunder. As I grasped my hard-earned diploma and smiled genuinely for the camera, I felt prepared to leave for Nicaragua as a Peace Corps volunteer in a few months. Much like my stormy graduation ceremony, my experience as a Peace Corps volunteer in Nicaragua has presented some challenges and is not exactly as I expected, but nonetheless, it has been interesting, and at the end of the day, I feel grateful to be here.

Although I had read books about Nicaragua and talked with returned Peace Corps volunteers, I could not have envisioned my day to day reality in Nicaragua. Recently, a friend from the US e-mailed me, asking me how many stop signs I have in my town. I could not help but laugh. We do not have a single stop sign, nor do we have a need for one. There is one primary unpaved road, and the horses, cows, chickens, and goats far outnumber the few cars that pass my house each day. My friend clearly did not have the slightest idea as to how I live if she were envisioning a town with stop signs.

Bright and early at 5:30, I wake to a cacophony of sounds far too loud for this early hour: roosters incessantly crowing to announce the morning, hungry pigs squealing for food, barking dogs snarling at each other, crackling of rice and beans frying in the kitchen, an eclectic mix of rap, Latin pop, and seventies music blaring from stereos, and Marvin's, my two year old host brother, giggles while watching his favorite Tweety bird cartoons. I then go out for a run, waving to my neighbors and friends who still momentarily stop their work to stare at me, unable to comprehend why anyone would choose to run for pleasure. I am careful to dodge stray farm animals, puddles of soapy, used water, and piles of animal excrement and garbage. I never tire of my daily runs, because I run by giant volcanoes, endless green

fields, and if I am particularly observant, I can catch a glimpse of monkeys in the tree canopy.

I return to my house for a cold bucket bath, and like all my meals, breakfast consists primarily of rice and beans. Later in the day, I might give a lesson about the difference between organic and inorganic trash at the local elementary school, or I might organize a tree-planting activity with my students. Every afternoon Francisco, my fourteen year old host brother and I watch *Los Simpsons*, while my host mom shakes her head and wonders why we like to watch a television show about ugly, yellow dolls. I often relax in a rocking chair on neighbors' front porches, while they talk about the rising price of beans, the weather, the most recent political scandal or the latest gossip in the town.

After dinner, I spend my evenings in the park playing Frisbee or dodgeball with my little host cousins and their friends. I often find myself sitting on a park bench answering questions about my life in the US, trying to satisfy the curiosity of young kids who want to know if I speak English, if the little kids in the US speak English, if I eat rice and beans in the US, if I have a mom and dad, if I am married, if I have been on a plane before, etc. I generally go to bed around 9:00 in darkness so complete that I cannot see my own hand inches away from my face.

I still wake up some days amazed that just a year ago, I was finishing up my last semester at IWU, running at Shirk, and working on the Park Place Economist at the Econ lab. Five seconds of staring at the white mosquito net hanging over my bed serves as a quick reminder that I am no longer a student at IWU but rather a Peace Corps volunteer in Nicaragua.

I joined the Peace Corps for many reasons: to experience another culture, to learn to speak Spanish fluently, to experience firsthand grassroots development work, to serve my country, and to avoid the daily grind of corporate America. Most importantly,

I feel blessed to have been given so many privileges simply by virtue of my place of birth. A child born to a poor family in Nicaragua is not responsible for his/her poverty any more than a child born to a comparatively wealthy family in the US is responsible for his/her wealth. I want to use some of the privileges that I have been given to help those people who were not given the same opportunities. When I wonder why I am here in Nicaragua, I think of my fourteen year old host brother, Francisco. He loves computers, and whenever he has money, he goes to the internet cafes. He wants to go to college for a degree in computer science. I want him to have the opportunity to go to college just as I did. Being a Peace Corps volunteer is not going magically give every child in Nicaragua access to higher education, but I am making a difference in Francisco's life.

John F. Kennedy founded the Peace Corps in 1961 with the purpose of promoting world peace and understanding. The goals of the Peace Corps involve promotion of economic and social development, transfer of technical skills and knowledge to host countries, and reciprocal cross cultural exchange. Since the establishment of the Peace Corps, 178,000 volunteers have served in 138 developing nations (Peace Corps).

Currently, 176 volunteers serve Nicaragua in the following sectors: environmental education, small business development, community health education, and sustainable food security. I am an environmental education volunteer, living and working in the small rural community of El Rosario, located in the southwestern section of Nicaragua.

Nicaragua, with a population of 5.5 million, is located in Central America, sharing a border with Honduras to the north and Costa Rica to the south (The World Bank Group). Often called the "land of lakes and volcanoes," Nicaragua possesses spectacular geographical beauty. From the hammock on my front porch, I can gaze at volcano Concepción, situated on the island of Ometepe in Lake Nicaragua, while eating juicy mangos picked from trees in my backyard. Just as impressive as the natural beauty, Nicaraguans are one of the friendliest, open people I have encountered. Since the very first day I arrived at their house, my host family has treated me as if I were their daughter/sister by blood instead of merely a visitor.

Unfortunately, Nicaragua's picturesque landscape and friendly population does not prevent

extreme poverty. Nicaragua is the second poorest country in the western hemisphere. Over half the population exists below the poverty line; 25% of Nicaraguans subsists on less than a dollar a day; the average per capita gross national income reaches just \$710 a year, (The World Bank Group). A third of Nicaraguans do not have reliable access to clean drinking water (Peaceworks), and less than half the rural population has electricity (The World Bank Group). 23% of adults are illiterate (The World Bank Group). The typical adult completes only 3.5 years of schooling, and only 60% of children enroll in secondary school (UNICEF). Approximately, 20% of children under the age of five suffer from malnutrition (Fonsesca).

The question that remains is: why is Nicaragua so poor? The answer is, of course, very complicated, though I would like to state few observations that I noted during the four months I have been in the country. Nicaragua's economy is based heavily upon the exportation of primary, non-value added products, such as coffee, beets, sugar, bananas, shellfish, and tobacco (The World Bank Group). The profit from raw material is low compared to the profit from processed raw materials or manufactured goods. The majority of agriculture is subsistence and used only for domestic consumption (Berman). Consequently, a large portion of the 40% of the population employed in agriculture struggles just to satisfy their own consumption needs. Also, the price of coffee drastically declined to a fraction of its former price since 1997. The coffee industry employs approximately 15% of the nation's labor force and is one of Nicaragua's chief exports.

As an environmental education volunteer, I work at a cooperative, called Coofrutari, which processes locally grown tropical fruit into juice, candy, marmalade, and chips. The formation of the fruit-processing cooperative stems, in part, from the difficulty of earning a profit from raw primary products. Nicaragua possesses incredible natural resources, including fertile land, but even a high-quality agricultural product does not necessary translate into economic success. Much of the agricultural products produced from this land never reach the national market let alone the international market. Currently, the cooperative is still in the trial phase but will soon expand from the local market to the national market. Eventually, Coofrutari hopes to sell its products internationally. The cooperative produces

good products, but the cooperative members, who are primarily farmers, not business people, struggle with the commercialization and management of Coofrutari.

In addition to the problems associated with primary product agriculture, high levels of unemployment contribute to Nicaragua's poverty. Approximately one out of four Nicaraguans are unemployed, and an even larger segment of the employed population suffers from serious underemployment (The World Bank Group). 100,000 jobs need to be created annually just to match population growth. Almost immediately after arriving in Nicaragua, I noticed that a lot of people did not work outside of the house, and often, large households exist on a single income, particularly in rural zones. When I conduct surveys, inquiring about the community's problems, the overwhelming majority of people lament about the lack of available jobs.

Although lack of education and poverty are highly correlated, even my limited experience in Nicaragua causes me to doubt that education alone is the panacea for poverty. Children from poor families generally achieve lower levels of education, because their families cannot afford school uniforms and supplies, and their families need help planting and harvesting. Thus, many children never develop the basic skills and knowledge that would help them find employment as adults. However, many high school or college educated adults do not have the opportunity to apply the education they attained.

My host family exemplifies underemployment. My host mom, Claudia Sevilla Torres, graduated from college with a degree in agronomy. Despite her best efforts, she never found work as an agronomist and currently maintains the household. My host father, Javier Amador Cano, is a trained mechanic, yet he is only sporadically employed as mechanic in Nicaragua, and he only had steady employment as a mechanic when he lived in Costa Rica.

Due to the stagnant job market, many Nicaraguans choose to sell various products from their home. Almost every household sells some type of product, ranging from juice to tortillas to chips. My host family operated a kiosk in the park at night, selling snack food, such as fried plantain chips, tacos, and juice. This household selling exemplifies entrepreneurship, which, if expanded and modified, could help reduce poverty in Nicaragua. If jobs do not

exist, then create them.

In addition to small scale household selling, many Nicaraguans respond to the lack of available jobs with relocation. Approximately 10% of the Nicaraguan population lives abroad, most commonly in the United States and Costa Rica. Generally, individuals leave behind their children with extended family, work abroad in low-skill jobs, and send money home. Almost every family has a relative living in the United States or Costa Rica. For example, my host parents lived in Costa Rica for seven years in order to earn enough money to build a house in Nicaragua. Although a single person working in a low skill job abroad can support financially his or her entire family in Nicaragua, this practice fragments families, causing social problems. Also, while money sent from relatives working abroad helps improve the living standard of some families, it does not address the fundamental causes of their poverty.

When I talk to my family and friends about the Peace Corps, they invariably end up remarking about the huge sacrifice I have made. I can never quite convey that I do not view living in Nicaragua as a sacrifice but rather a privilege. Nicaraguans show me so much generosity, giving me anything from the only available chair in a room to the last slice of birthday cake to their genuine concern and affection. When I return to the US (assuming that I do not marry a Nicaraguan and stay here forever as everyone in my town hopes), I can take hot showers, use running water, eat lots of sushi, but for the next two years, I am happy to play tag in the park at night, to hear my two-year old host brother finally learn to say my name, to watch one of the many noisy parades and shoot off fireworks in the park, and to help my five-year old neighbor read her *Cinderella* and *Corduroy Bear* picture books.

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