

# Nicaragua Immersion: Day One

MAY 8, 2016 BY VOLSTU16

May 4, 2016

Hello Moreau Center Staff, friends of the University, very concerned parents, and distant relatives,

I suppose the only proper way to begin telling about today is to start with the journey of yesterday. After about five different combinations of flight schedules within our group ranging from layovers in Charlotte & Miami to Los Angeles and El Salvador we all arrived in Managua with a substantial twenty or so hours of traveling under our belts. I think I speak for the group when I say that it was a long journey to get here with lots of moving parts and we were excited to the point of delusion when we reached Nicaragua.

A bus was waiting for us at the airport as well as one of the employees, Brian, of “Witness for Peace” which is the organization we are staying with for the next few days. I don’t think I’ve heard so many people excited for Nature Valley bars as when Brian handed them out to the starving college kids that packed into that bus like sardines after our flights. We had a pleasant air-conditioned private bus ride with Brian through downtown Managua where he told us about things we passed along the drive.

Once we got to the place we’re staying, Centro Capacitacion, the women split to their side of the residence and the men to the other to get settled. If you’re wondering or at all curious what our residence looks like I’ll give a brief description. It’s a walled area with a locked gate on the exterior and the inside is kind of like a courtyard. With tables and chairs in the courtyard and dormitories lining the outside walls, it’s a neat place to gather. Once we were settled in, Brian had us all meet up and we learned more about the history of Nicaragua. Then we ate a delicious lunch that is cooked in the kitchen of Centro Capacitacion comprised of homemade fried chicken, rice, beans and a mixed berry juice. It was bomb!

After lunch we had a few hours to kill until a speaker came and talked to us about the Nicaraguan revolution and also shared with us her story of growing up in Nicaragua. Gloria was a really smart woman who studied at both the London School of Economics and NYU for a masters in film-making. We watched a short preview of the movie she is directing about Nicaragua and the political and social hardships that it has endured over the last forty years. With Gloria we talked about her experience with her and what she sees with Nicaragua as a country going forward. She is concerned that people are going to forget the emotions that plagued her country for so long before, during and after the revolution in the late 80s.

After Gloria spoke we had dinner together which was a vegetarian pasta with a sauce that no one could quite put their finger on and fresh tortilla chips. So altogether, we’re eating really well on

our first day, which makes me more happy than you know. That concludes our first day's activities and for the first time in a long time, I am going to go to bed before eight o'clock as is most of the group. We had a great first day and we're ready to take on tomorrow!

Keegan Murphy '18

## **Nicaragua Immersion: Day Two**

MAY 8, 2016 BY VOLSTU16

May 5, 2015

Hola Friends and Family!

We started the day with another tasty meal. It included rice and beans with tortillas, an egg dish, a tasty Nicaraguan pastry, and some coffee (this was very much appreciated). After enjoying this wonderful food we talked as a group and made some expectations for our adventure here in Nicaragua. We also discussed popular education. This included talking about how we can best learn from the Nicaraguan culture (ver/escuchar) and how we can bring this to action when we get back home. After that we wrapped up the group discussion with some reflection and history on "Witness for Peace."

We headed out into the city of Managua after being served more delicious food for lunch, which included rice, vegetables, plantanos, and a meat falafal item (not really sure what it was, but it was tasty!). In the city we started out in a market where we got to learn what it was like to buy food off the typical Nicaraguan budget. This was a very eye-opening experience to see how little they can get for all their hard work, which was often 12 hours a day in the hot sun. This was also a great chance to test out our Spanish. We encountered one lady who was learning English and understood our struggle with speaking Spanish and it was comforting to have someone understand the struggle we faced with communicating in a different language. Once we wrapped up our adventure in the market we headed to a dump site where we heard from a few different people. It was very hard to see and hear about the conditions that people lived in there, but through it all they all seemed to keep a very positive and selfless attitude. This was awesome to see especially with all the adversity they faced. While at the dump site we visited "Podcasts for Peace" where we got the opportunity to hear a couple more people speak and play with some of the local kids, which we all enjoyed a lot. This center was awesome, they focused on teaching various things and providing a safe and friendly place for kids to come. The trip to the dump was definitely hard for us to see, but it was a very valuable experience.

After a long day we headed back to headquarters where we had a last reflection of the day and dinner. Dinner was delicious as usual and consisted of spaghetti, potatoes, popcorn, and soda! After dinner we went on a search for some ice-cream, and we are all ready for some rest after a hot day in the sun!

Christine '18

## **Nicaragua Immersion: Day Three**

MAY 9, 2016 BY VOLSTU16

Hola!

This country is absolutely captivating.

Today we explored many facets of social justice in Nicaragua, both positive and negative. We spent the first half of our day in the town San Marcos at an orphanage called Los Quinchos. We heard a brief history of this organization from the woman that started it 25 years prior. "Mamita" as the children called her, spoke from her heart about how Nicaragua has changed substantially since she has been in the country, pausing often as kids from the orphanage would burst in for a hug or kiss. We got the chance to visit the compounds that the boys and girls from Los Quinchos stay, and played a game of Monkey in the Middle with a few energetic girls. We visited the farm where the boys live, which was a huge plot of land reserved for their farm animals. We ran around through a trail in which the boys play frequently, eating the mangoes, avocados, and other tasty treats that they threw to us, 10 feet high in the trees. The leaders of both compounds told our group about the problems they face surrounding water at the orphanage. Because water is a privatized resource in Nicaragua, it is simply too expensive or not available in many areas. Los Quinchos has tried many ways to bring water to their community, now using barrels that hold water either caught by rain or brought into the community by transit.

Next we visited a community of ex-banana farmers. These "Hero's of Nemagon" have been in a fight against the US for the past 24 years, seeking retribution from damage to their health caused by a pesticide called Nemagon. This pesticide was banned for use in the US in the 50's, and instead was brought down to Central America. This chemical can remain in the community for four generations, plaguing children with the same arthritis, cancers, and other deleterious health effects of their parents. Knowing the harmful consequences of this chemical on human lives, I still have a hard time reconciling that our country performed this action. It was devastating hearing their stories knowing that by my own ignorance and the ignorance of most of the people I hold close to my heart, have unknowingly condoned the actions of the US by our own consumption. Tomorrow a parade will be held on the street where the Asociacion de Bananeros de Occidente finds its home, this event celebrating Nicaraguan culture and history.

The night ended with a mother, daughter, and son sharing the music of Nicaragua through their band. Nathan mentioned the beauty of their music complemented with the strikes of lightning behind the three, almost symbolically characterizing the beauty of this country.

Brooke '16

## **Nicaragua Immersion: Day Four**

MAY 9, 2016 BY VOLSTU16

May 7th,

Hola Friends and Family!

Today started out with a much needed conversation with in the group regarding all that we had learned the day before. In small groups we discussed many social justice aspects regarding both Los Quinchos and our meeting with the former banana workers in regards to social justice. We came a realization of the difficulty in our interventions across borders and the differences between charity and justice. A lot of times we have very reactive responses to the things surrounding us, which are extremely important, but there are many shortfalls in this model. The example which was utilized greatly was the analogy of babies running down a stream, please stick with me on this and keep in mind this is all figurative. Essentially you have babies coming down a stream, you make the decision of taking them out of the river but if you do not attempt to take care of the source of the babies, will the stream ever actually end? Feel free to interpret that as you will but to us it requires work on both ends but we realize it is really difficult to get to the source of things so something for us all to keep in mind is how do we work from the source of issues within vulnerable populations, there really is no easy answer.

After our discussion we were able to make our way to the edge of Lake Managua, the smaller of the major lakes in Nicaragua, to explore the city more and get an informative tour of Managua courtesy of our guide Joe from Jersey, a man who after studying abroad fell in love with the country and now calls it home. We started by discussing the importance of Nicaragua due to its geographical location and this influencing its colonial roots and our consistent hand in Nicaraguan affairs. Another fun fact is that Nicaragua is the land of Lakes and Volcanoes, 17 volcanoes to be exact that are pretty darn active and pretty darn cool to look at. Nicaragua has a pretty hefty history but a major catalyst for revolutionary change in Nicaragua was the earthquake of 1972 which essentially leveled Managua, and left only 4 buildings, we had the opportunity to walk through a miniature replica of the former city and walk down the perfectly named Roosevelt Blvd (highlighting US influence). As far as government and the kinds of government in Nicaragua there is a lot that has happened since the 1930's. So a brief summary: workers rights, Sandino and his little army and angry men, a dictatorship led by the Samoja family (a strong ally of the US), some scandals with the US, A revolution begins to brew, Carlo Fongseca inspired by Sandino, Independence, Free trade, more issues with workers rights. My

recommendation, do some reading of your own but really keep in mind US involvement in these affairs, which is major. Also Dominos funded the building of a church of an egg carton which is super strange and speaks volumes to what we are doing down here.

We also had the experience of getting to visit a sewing co-op that is currently in the transition from being a free trade zone and changing its name to Womens New Life Co-op. It was created by a group of women that had lived on the coast of Lake Managua and were displaced by Hurricane Mitch in 1998. Through their new community they were able to organize and create this group as to help bring funds to the community. These women worked and trained to be able to make simple shirts step by step, having no major experience prior. A top of learning how to sew and actually make product they conducted research on what it would take to utilize organic materials, mainly imported from Peru, to make all of their products. Along with learning the history of these phenomenal women we were also able to begin discussing Free Trade in Central America. I will begin by saying it is not great and it is astonishing to think of our lack of awareness in regards to where the products we utilize come from and the conditions in which they are made. Many restrictions are put on the groups producing in free trade zones which create for poorer conditions. The work that is done by this community of women is extremely inspiring. They remain environmentally conscious and are maintaining work although they are currently unable to make a profit from their goods. I will leave you with the motto of the group: Our Sweat, Our Sale, Our Success.

This was actually nowhere near the end of our day. Our next stop was visiting a small community and getting to have a very insightful conversation about health in Nicaragua with a health promoter named Maria. Maria was gracious enough to invite us into her home where we met 3 cats and a dog named Russo who is now my best buddy. Not only did she open up our home to us but the clinic in which members of the community go to is run out of Marias home. Not only does she distribute medications in the community, now up to 20, she also has important conversations about sexual health, which I found fascinating. The major take away from this visit was her discussing the importance of actually teaching individuals things such as simple as how to take a temperature. Many people do not even know how to properly use a thermometer, leaving them feeling helpless in regards to health. Maria also told us her motive in becoming a health promoter, which she volunteers for and does entirely out of the goodness of her heart and desire to help the community. She almost lost her only daughter due to being unable to care for her when she developed a severe fever at a young age, this is a common. Out of this came a positive end, Maria was inspired to ensure no other women felt so helpless in the care of their children. Her daughter is now 16 and is actually taking over the duties of health promoter, she is a vivacious and inspiring young woman.

All and all today was a day filled with strong inspirational women. They highlighted taking control of their disadvantage and taking the opportunity to turn this disadvantage into lasting growth. Their love and strength in community is something we hope to carry back with us and utilize in whatever ways we can in our own lives.

Wheaton 17'

# Nicaragua Immersion: Day Five

MAY 13, 2016 BY VOLSTU16

May 8th, 2016

¡Hola!

Today we traveled to La Curva, which is a community in Masatepe. The bus ride from Managua was about an hour long with beautiful views the whole way there. The community of La Curva is a small farming community. While in this community we were able to talk with a woman, who wished to remain anonymous, who works in the free trade zone that is in the La Curva community. The group had lunch at a beautiful restaurant in the community that had a variety of options, which were all delicious. I tried the fruit punch and it was amazing because they make it thicker like a smoothie rather than just juice... YUM! After lunch we were also able to talk to Jairo, who started a program in 1999 called "Artepintura".

The lady that works in the free trade zone has six sons and lives in La Curva. She has worked in the free trade zone for 11 years. Hearing her experience working at the free trade zone was extremely difficult to process. They are required to be at work at 6:45am in order to get searched and patted down by the guards. Workers are not allowed to bring in any food or other items. They begin their work at 7am and they are not allowed to talk with other workers. She told us about the owners of the free trade zone, Mr. and Mrs. King, and that Mrs. King would walk around the factory and yell at people for talking. She says that they look for reasons to fire workers. They work until 12:00 and they then get a 20 minute lunch break. This is the only break they receive all day. If you think about it, 20 minutes isn't enough time to leave and get a lunch from home and come back and they also aren't allowed to bring any food in, so this basically forces workers to buy food in the cafeteria of the free trade zone or have someone bring them a lunch during the break and pass it through the gates. Expecting someone to purchase a lunch or have someone bring them a lunch everyday is ridiculous. On top of that only eating once in a 12 hour workday seems impossible. She continued to tell us that they worked until 7pm and sometimes they would be required to stay and work throughout the night. The workers only made C\$ 1,800 every fourteen days which is equivalent to about \$65 every 14 days. Not only is the pay very low, but the conditions that they work in are awful as well. She currently has 15 days off of work because of residue in the fabrics that accumulated in her lungs. During her days off she is only receiving a fourth of her normal pay. Many people have the conception that free trade zones are great; however, after hearing her story and gaining more knowledge about free trade zones, they aren't as great as people think they are. Imagine working 12 hours with one 20 minute break... Do you think you could do that six days a week for eleven years?

In addition to Marí speaking, Jairo told us about the program that he created in the community. This is a program that focuses on bringing art to the communities around Masatepe. Jairo and kids from the program go to other communities and recruit other individuals who are interested in joining the program. There are five other communities that participants are from,

which Jairo and the children go visit for two hours each week. They have now helped over 2,500 kids with painting. At the end of our meeting there were different works of art that the kids had created and we were able to view these pieces and purchase them if wanted. I purchased the most beautiful postcard that Jairo himself painted and a coconut shell which was designed and painted by one of the children in the program.

We then traveled back to Managua and prepared for the home stays that we are going on tomorrow! I feel very anxious, nervous and excited to be traveling to a community where we will stay for the next three days. I'm not really sure what to expect, but I am beyond excited to have this new experience and to immerse myself into another culture.

On a different note, today is Mother's Day and I would like to give my mom a special shout out! Thank you for being so worried about me before I left for this trip. I know that it's because you care so much and even though I act annoyed, I really love when you worry about me. Thanks for being the most loving and generous person, I don't know where I would be without you!

Can't wait to share our experience at the home stays with you when we return on Thursday!

Much love!

Payton Bushaw '18

## **Days Six, Seven and Eight**

MAY 13, 2016 BY VOLSTU16

Buenos dias!

We just got back to Managua from three days in the community of El Regadio. In these three days, we were put into groups of two or three and lived in a household with the campesinos and campesinas. My partner Kim and I joked about being huérfanas, or orphans because our host mother was in a different town when we first arrived. We spent the afternoon with a different family who graciously took us in. Our foster house had every animal you could think of in the back yard, from two dogs and a kitten to a pig and horse to hens and baby chicks. At one point we even helped Lesbia herding the turkeys into their "sleeping coop". As dinner rolled around, our host mother was still not home and Lesbia was kind enough to invite us into their home for dinner. She showed us how to roll out the tortillas and we then let us make all of the tortillas for the family. It's amazing how a family that we weren't even supposed to be staying with was willing and excited to take us in and teach us about their house, their family and a little bit of the their culture for the night.

Our host mother was Modesta, a grandmother who owns a little store in the town. Her and her husband, like most of the families in El Regadio, have a “finca” or farm outside of town where they keep cows and horses. Unfortunately, their farm was too far for us to go and visit. Yamileth and Edgar, Noah and Anthony’s host parents were kind enough to let us go with them one morning to learn how to milk the cows. Edgar was so humble about his farm, and yet you could see the pride pouring out of his eyes as he talked about raising the cows, many of which he has had since they were babies. Again, the generosity that this family had towards Kim and myself was incredible, allowing us to be a part of their “finca” and continuing to learn from them and their community.

On the last night, the community and our group got together to have a celebration. A group of musicians came and played traditional Nicaraguan music and we all danced together. Our group was asked to also prepare something as well. We wanted to include everyone, including our bus driver Luis who has been with us for the entire trip. Therefore we came up with a Spanish rendition of Wheels on the Bus sang in Spanish. We made up two verses, one was “the gringos on the bus say . . .” and one was “the Nicaraguans on the bus . . .” This was an amazing way to end the three days because it was a chance for all of the families and all of the kids to relate to one another on a universal level, music, dance and laughter.

There’s so many stories that I could share about the past three days, but I hope that these few stories give all of you reading the sense of community and love that we all felt while being in El Regadio. One thing that one of the women said that encompasses their community is, “with love, great things can be accomplished”. Despite the immense obstacles they have faced, two wars and endless oppression, they’ve have prospered because of their strong community.

Abigail ’18

## **Nicaragua Immersion: Days Ten, Eleven and Twelve**

MAY 20, 2016 BY VOLSTU16

May 13, 14, & 15

This weekend we traveled from Managua to Matagalpa to begin our week of service with Seeds of Learning. As previously stated, we had an amazing time with Witness for Peace and left Managua feeling inspired, yet overwhelmed with all the information we were attempting to process. With that being said, we were looking forward to a change of pace with a week of service. After a laughter-filled bus ride, we arrived in Matagalpa with full bladders and hungry stomachs.



After settling in and enjoying a delicious and much needed lunch, we headed over to the library to see what SOL was all about. The director, Minna, started the library not too long ago and was very excited to share it with us. She started the library because books are hard to come by in Nicaragua and she is a huge advocate for the power of reading both in and out of school. The library also employs teachers to come and help students with their homework after school. Even on a Friday after school, there were -about 15 children there that were excited for the daily read-a-loud. After the book reading, we were briefly introduced to what the current educational system is like here in Nicaragua. Currently, the Ministry of Education, which is overseen by the president, dictates what is and is not taught in schools. Children all across the country are studying the same topics on a weekly basis. There are a few problems in this system because the Ministry of Education doesn't provide textbooks and teachers have to pay for them out of pocket. Also, there are no significant yearly checks to make sure that the students are on the right path. For example, children might make it to the 6<sup>th</sup> grade without even learning to read.

On Saturday, we got to sleep in a little bit and then we went to a festival to explore the local vibe. There were lots of street vendors and people shopping for locally made trinkets. Matagalpa is very different than Managua because it is smaller, set in the mountains and a lot cooler. Also, there seems to be a lot more money in Matagalpa in terms of the businesses and the architecture. Later in the day, we were lucky enough to have a seed-jewelry making workshop with some local artisans. They were a group of women who needed more income to support their families and they decided to use local seeds to make beautifully crafted jewelry. They let us copy any design we wanted and they helped us to make unique pieces. Their business is successful, particularly because of tourists. It was really kind of them to share their supplies and talent with us.

On Sunday, we got to go to a local artisan's house and learn about an ancient art form called black pottery. She taught us about her entire process in making the black pottery and we even got to make a piece for ourselves. This art form has been popular in Central and Latin America for centuries so it was really awesome that we got to experience it firsthand. It takes a long time to gather the clay, prep it, shape it and fire it. Her family has passed down their skills over many generations and it was amazing to see her dedication and knowledge about this craft. We all enjoyed expressing our creativity and making small pieces of our own.

Overall, it was a relaxing weekend and we had a lot of down time. We were not expecting this much of a change of pace because we were so used to long days filled with a lot of information during our time with Witness for Peace. Even though we originally struggled with this, we tried to enjoy the down time before a long week of construction.

Kaileigh Valentine '19

# **Nicaragua Immersion: Days Thirteen – Seventeen**

MAY 23, 2016 BY VOLSTU16

May 16-20, 2016

After a relaxed weekend of getting to know Matagalpa and Seeds of Learning, we were hard at work early Monday morning. The approach that Seeds of Learning takes in regards to service is a very active one, meaning that the major focus of our stay in Matagalpa was construction work. The school selected by Seeds of Learning and the Nicaragua Ministry of Education for this project is named Quince de Septiembre after Nicaragua's Independence Day. Currently the school has several classrooms but the space available for teaching is insufficient for the number of students attending the school. The school day is split into two sessions as all classes cannot be accommodated at the same time and some classes are held off site. In addition to this, there is no kitchen or bathroom (only an outhouse). The Seeds of Learning project will be adding additional classrooms to the school and will be building a kitchen and bathrooms. This project will likely take the entire year, but our group was fortunate enough to contribute to it during the week that we were in Matagalpa.

Although we worked longer on the first day (probably because of our built up energy from the previous weekend), we worked about four hours each day. On a typical day, we would eat breakfast at 7am, get to the work site at 8am, and leave the worksite at about noon. Each day on the worksite, we were greeted by Marlin, Martin, and Cruz who were employed by Seeds of Learning. As they all had a great deal of experience working construction, watching us was pretty funny for them. They were all incredibly helpful and each of us enjoyed getting to know them over the week. We also worked alongside community members, such as mothers of the students, who wanted to volunteer their time as well. Working alongside the community members was very meaningful because it was clear that this project was very important to the community as many people showed up to volunteer and work hard for their kids. Under the supervision of Marlin, Marvin, and Cruz, we helped with several different tasks, including mixing concrete, shoveling dirt, bending iron, and laying bricks. We also had a little time to hang out with the kids, coloring and blowing bubbles. By the end of the week, we were all dirty, bruised, sunburned, and exhausted but we walked away happy, knowing that our time and efforts went to this important project.

After working, we would eat lunch and then participate in some sort of activity in the community. This included do crafts and playing games with students at the library or at school. One highlight of the week was going to the school that last year's UP Nicaragua Immersion group helped to build. It was lovely seeing the completed project that they had worked hard on and hearing from the community about its positive impacts. While at the school, we hiked up to an open field with all the students from the school where they liked to play soccer and it started to POUR. Everyone was drenched and covered in mud but also really really

happy. Everyone had huge smiles on their faces as they ran through the rain and mud playing soccer.

We left the school worksite for the last time on Friday, which was very emotional. Before we left, the pre-school students performed dances, songs, and poems for us to say good-bye. In return, we sang our own rendition of “The Wheels on the Bus”- Nicaragua style. It was truly difficult to say goodbye to the children, workers, parents, and teachers who welcomed us so warmly into their community.

Molly Turner ‘17