

Buenos días, estoy muy feliz de estar con todos ustedes esta mañana y tener esta oportunidad de compartir mis experiencias de verano con ustedes.

Good morning, I am very happy to be with all of you this morning and to have this opportunity to share my summer experiences with you. I'm grateful for the interest so many of you have shown in both my academic and spiritual path, and my month in Central America this summer turned out to be a significant part of my spiritual formation. It was an experience in embracing my own humanity and limitations and at the same time being witness to the incredible power of the Gospel to change lives for generations to come. But let me start at the beginning.

In December of 2015, one month after Bishop O'Neill accepted me as a postulant for ordination to the priesthood, Nature and I met with him to discuss my plans for seminary and his expectations for my postulancy. In that meeting Bishop Rob laid out three expectations. I had to graduate from seminary, learn Spanish and complete a mission type experience outside of the US. I knew that Spanish was going to be a challenge for me so I searched for a Spanish language emersion program and hoped to find one which also included community service of some type.

The organization I chose specializes in training professionals, especially medical personnel and teachers, but others as well, who use Spanish in their work. I interviewed the program director of Common Ground International and was especially drawn to the community settings they were using as a part of their language training. So, with Bishop O'Neill's agreement, I signed up for four weeks of Spanish immersion in Nicaragua and Costa Rica. I left here at the end of June with a vocabulary of less than 30 words.



To refresh your junior high geography, here's a map of Central America. I flew into Managua, Nicaragua, a four-hour flight from Dallas. It's not that far away!



We were actually based in Granada, the former capital of Nicaragua, for the first two weeks and near San Jose, Costa Rica for the second two weeks. I stayed with host families for that entire time.

I want to share a few facts about these countries, just to give you some context for this experience. Nicaragua is the poorest country in Central America and the second poorest in the Western Hemisphere, second only to Haiti. Less than 25% of the working population have access to the security of a fixed salary.¹ The literacy rate is 78%² and under and unemployment totals more than 50%. The tap water is not potable. Prostitution is legal and orphanages are illegal. Education is compulsory up to age 12 but less than 60% of children finish primary school because the family needs them to bring in some sort of income.³

Costa Rica is in better shape. First of all, the literacy rate is 98%, and education is highly valued. And we could drink the tap water, a definite plus! There is more infrastructure in Costa Rica but still not much by our standards. For example, we were in a major population center and the town had 2 traffic lights. I honestly felt like I was taking my life in my hands every time I walked the mile from my house to school. Every day was a new adventure!

Although life was easier in Costa Rica, I found the history and culture of Nicaragua much more engaging. These are some of the daily sights in Nicaragua



- Granada street scene

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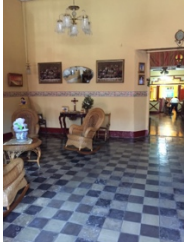
- Daily produce delivery

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¹CIA World Fact Book via UNIDOS web site accessed 8/9/17, <http://unidosnicaragua.org/our-work/life-in-nicaragua/>

² Total adult literacy rate (%) 2008-2012, survey data from UNICEF web site accessed 8/9/17, https://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/nicaragua_statistics.html

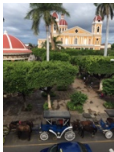
³ Primary school participation, Survival rate to last primary grade (%) , 2008-2012*, survey data from UNICEF web site accessed 8/9/17, https://www.unicef.org/infobycountry/nicaragua_statistics.html



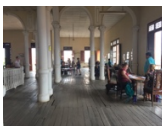
- Living room of house (colonial style so homes are large with interior courtyards. However, there is no hot water, no a/c, temps and humidity in 90's every day, doors have auxiliary dead bolt, plus exterior iron gate with key lock and additional padlock applied at night, no screens on the windows, wore insect repellent all the time, even at night)



- View of exterior of language school (school occupied upper level of one side of the building, note colonial style architecture)



- View from balcony of language school of basilica (horses and carriages are for tourists but horses are a fundamental part of the transportation system)



- Language school in session (one large room with huge doors opening to the outside which provided ventilation, until the afternoon thunderstorms blew through)

Our days were structured with the mornings dedicated to preparing for and doing community service projects. The afternoons, from 1-5 were spent in Spanish language classes.



But we did have some weekends free and I took those opportunities to visit the beautiful Pacific beaches of Nicaragua and Costa Rica.

After two weeks in Nicaragua we boarded a bus for the 6 hour drive to San Jose, Costa Rica.



The high point of my personal enjoyment on this trip was my new host mama in Costa Rica, a single woman, named Giovanna. I spent two weeks in her loving care. She spoke no English but we had a great time.



Giovanna worked from home, assembling uniform shirts for local businesses, when she could get work. She earned the equivalent of about \$3 per shirt and the most I saw go out of the house in one week was maybe 30. She was also making a bit of money by hosting me. But do the math, this is a humble existence.

Now I want to jump back to my experience in Nicaragua with our community service projects. That was where I witnessed the transformative power of God at work in the lives of people many would think God had forgotten.



These are the grounds of the Granada Christian Education Center, a sports and education ministry located on the outskirts of Granada. This scene looks pastoral, but it is a solitary oasis in the midst of profound poverty.

I mentioned the condition of the education system in Nicaragua, this school is the story of how one man, a US citizen and recovering drug addict named Charles, decided to create something better for the children of Nicaragua. Charles had originally gone to Nicaragua to gain easier access to drugs. But he got clean, finished his education in the US and became a successful businessman. He also embraced Christianity and later felt a call from God to return to Central America to see what he and his family could do to break the generational cycle of poverty.



Charles created a mighty vision of a sports and education ministry, grounded in Christian values, and located in the heart of one of the worst barrios in Nicaragua.



He gained the support of many for this vision and the Granada Christian Education Center is now well on its way to achieving its long term vision of providing a high quality education from preschool through high school.



Our project was to go out in small groups of 2-3, with one of the teachers from the school and conduct surveys in the neighborhoods of Pantanal.



Our survey was a short inventory of some key indicators of the poverty level of each family we visited.



We asked about how many people were living in the house, what the floor was made of, how many rooms, etc.



This is a new house under construction and actually looked much more sturdy than many we saw.



What impressed me most about the Granada Christian Education Center is that this is not a project some Westerner thought would be good for the community so he built his dream and handed it over. This is a vision which is being created for the community but also by the community. Parents have to be involved in the children's education and they have to pay a small fee for their children to attend. One of the biggest problems with the education system in Nicaragua is the lack of support provided by parents to keep their kids in school. Charles understands this and the school invests as much time and energy in the parents as it does in direct education of the children.

The other organization I want to tell you about is Casa de Esperanza or House of Hope, located near Managua, Nicaragua. House of Hope is a vocational rehabilitation program for women and their children trying to break free from the world of prostitution and human trafficking. Like the Granada Christian Education Center, it was started by a single individual. April, who was a Christian missionary with her husband in Nicaragua, felt called by God to do something to stop the cycle of women being sexually abused and forced into prostitution as their only means of survival.



House of Hope is a very modest collection of buildings on the outskirts of Granada.



There is a large open pavilion where hundreds of women come on Tuesday mornings to attend a worship service and to learn vocational skills. These women from age 13 on up are bussed in from the brothels of Granada.



The women are initially motivated to attend because they can make some money by working with their hands and minds instead of by selling their bodies. They make paper and beaded jewelry, cloth items like cosmetic bags and headbands, ceramic tree ornaments and greeting cards. Those items are then sold on the internet and the money goes back to the women.



But the goal of House of Hope is more than to provide women with an income stream, it is to create a dramatic transformation in the life of each of those women so that for that individual and her children, the cycle of sexual abuse and prostitution is broken.



Because this is a Christian based organization, they ground their work with the women not just in job training but in teaching and living the power of Christ and the word of God. The translation of this scripture which is on the wall of the sewing room is “For freedom Christ has set us free. Stand firm, therefore, and do not submit again to a yoke of slavery.”



When these women first arrive they see themselves as worthless and sinful because that is what they have been told they are. So the first job of House of Hope is to help each one see themselves as God sees them, as precious, gifted and worthy of love.



House of Hope also has a residential program which houses approximately 20 women and their children. Most of them were rescued directly off the streets or from a brothel. This is where they do their laundry.



And this is how they cook their food, after gathering wood for the fire.

These are families who desperately want out of their situations but have no options. They are trapped both by their predators and by their addictions to drugs and or alcohol. Life for these women is a constant battle for survival and it's every person for themselves.



A big job of the residential program is teaching individuals how to live in community and function in society. Most women who stay with the program graduate in 4 years. That's how long it takes to rebuild a human spirit from an abused, objectified, terrified and defeated bit of humanity.



Our job as volunteers was to lead small discussion groups with the residential women, teaching oral hygiene skills and age appropriate household tasks for children. These seem like very basic skills every parent would have but these women often had no parenting. 66% of the prostitutes in Nicaragua start by age 11. They've never experienced good parenting so they have no clue how to do it themselves.



Those who graduate from the residential program are given a \$500 micro grant to start their own business and they are allowed to live in a house outside the HoH campus. After 5 years, if they abide by the 5 rules of the program they receive the deed to their home. The five rules are that they 1)are clean and sober, 2)children are in school, 3)attend church, 4)maintain contact with House of Hope and 5)cannot be living with a man unless they are married.



The first day we spent at House of Hope we heard the testimony of Angela who had at one time been a school teacher. After her first husband died she married a man who forced her into prostitution because he wanted the income she could make. She worked the streets for many years and at the time we met her she had graduated from the residential program at HoH and was living in one of the sponsored homes nearby. Her story pulled at every cell of my heart and pushed every anger button in my body. What she had been through was incomprehensible to me and it went well beyond the victimization of prostitution. But those were not the feelings I carried with me as we left Casa de Espiranza that day, because that was not the end of Angela's story.

Angela is still in recovery, she has many challenges ahead because even with her micro grant to start her own business, a solid roof over her head and a support system to continue to nurture her recovery, life is very hard in Nicaragua. The constant burden of generational poverty will always be present to entice her back into the relatively lucrative income of the streets. But Angela is not weighed down by doubt in her future. As she spoke of her faith and trust in God's word made flesh in Jesus Christ, many of us found tears streaming down our faces.

I wonder about Angela's journey to faith and trust. What did it take? What made a difference for her? What opened her heart? I don't know the answer to those questions. I only know that what I witnessed those days at House of Hope moved me to the core.

In today's gospel Jesus reached out his hand and pulled Peter out of the water and back into the boat. Jesus got in the boat with the disciples and the wind stopped and the water calmed. That's what I heard in Angela's story. The House of Hope reached out and pulled Angela out of the water and she got in the boat and ultimately found peaceful waters.

Casa de Espiranza and the Granada Christian Education Center are the hands of Jesus reaching out to bring new life and new hope to the people of Nicaragua. The love of Christ is always extended to us, but Christ has no hands but ours to do the work of the Kingdom. And so I am left with the question, "What am I, what are we, doing with these hands?"