

Nicaragua: From dreams to reality

Lawrence McBride

On the 12th August 2006, a group of seven Irish campaigners left Belfast City airport bound for Nicaragua. The two-week stay was organised by Trócaire to coincide with advocacy activities in-country led by our partner organisations active on children's rights.

Trócaire's Lenten campaign in 2006 focussed on child labour, using Nicaragua as an example of a country where children are often denied an education and spend their childhoods working in arduous and often extremely hazardous conditions. Four young Nicaraguans had visited Ireland in March 2006 and their talks inspired the young activists from Ireland to get involved.

The campaigners were hosted by four of Trócaire's partner organisations: FUNARTE (who encourage the participation of young people through art murals), CESESMA (who defend the rights of workers on coffee plantations), Dos Generaciones (who work with people living and working on the municipal dump in the capital, Managua, encouraging them to take vocational courses and get training), and NATRAS, which works with street kids in cities all around Nicaragua.

Each young campaigner spent a week with one of the four partner organisations, lodging locally and experiencing their work first hand. Here are their views:

Nalina Eggert, 20:

I spent my time with FUNARTE in Estelí, two hours north of the capital Managua. Estelí was and still is a centre of Sandinista support, so elicits sighs of revolutionary yearning when I share my experiences with solidarity old-timers this side of the Atlantic.

FUNARTE provide art workshops for children across the city, in the prison and with young disabled people. Several times a year each workshop paints a mural on a theme they have been studying – the environment, a book they have read, Nicaragua's pre-colonial heritage or children's rights. Along with my young mentor Karina I attended workshops, toured the brightly coloured murals and spent a few days with some lively FUNARTE participants, painting a banner about free education.

Having worked in the area of children's rights in Ireland, I was delighted to see rights often listed on the walls, and heartened to hear people talking about 'participation', the buzzword everywhere we went. I was asked

by one adolescent called José – “Nalina, do you like people who participate?”

Since coming back I have thrown myself into Latin American issues. Given the personal link, my ears perk up every time I hear the word Nicaragua. I now have several very engaging, beautiful, funny and ‘participating’ reasons to care what happens in a small turbulent country on the other side of a massive ocean; that, for me, is the value of solidarity.

John Cunningham, 19:

I worked with Dos Generaciones, an organization that re-trains children and their parents who have been working on the municipal rubbish dump of Managua.

I spent time in their vocational centre where they teach baking, sowing, T-shirt printing, carpentry, and electrical engineering. The story of a 50 year old who thought her life was basically over before she began a computer course was tear-jerking, while hearing a girl of 17 (who had once sifted through rubbish) talk of her thriving hairdressing business was inspirational. The centre is just one of several projects undertaken by Dos Generaciones from free nursery and primary schools for child workers, right up to lobbying the Nicaraguan government on health and education.

In place of despair at witnessing the inhumane conditions just 100 metres down the road on the sprawling dump, meeting people with such zeal to make a better life filled me with hope.

My definition of a global citizen is someone who is conscious that the decisions and actions they take at home affect the lives of people around the world. This experience has challenged me to think more globally. Having made relationships with people like my mentor Yelda, who are making massive changes in, and are leaders of their own communities, I am challenged each day to act locally on behalf of people in my own community, country and indeed others around the world.

John Monaghan, 19:

I was hosted by NATRAS, an organisation which helps victims of abuse, primarily sexual abuse. It is a champion of children’s rights, a voice for its many young members who work in the local market or elsewhere. During our time there, NATRAS launched a national campaign urging young victims of sexual abuse to speak out.

I was amazed at the wonderful hospitality that we received everywhere we went. It was often frustrating seeing the poverty and knowing that we were not going to change the situation overnight.

A tough moment for me came at the market in Diriamba, a small

satellite town of Managua, when Marcos, our young guide for the week, introduced us to a boy of 16 who worked there. He told us that he had never been to school and could neither read nor write. At an age when many Irish people are contemplating taking A Levels or the Leaving Cert as a pathway to a university education, it seemed unthinkable that this young Nicaraguan lacked the most basic communication skills, and that his government is seemingly prepared to let this type of situation go unchallenged.

My chance to try and help remedy that was speaking at a Children's Rights forum in the University of Central America, addressing Presidential election candidates. Young Nicaraguans invited us to relate how our free primary and secondary education system in Ireland has fuelled recent economic success and how education underpins the most basic social progress. If anyone was in any doubt of the wisdom of supporting long-term development projects, the evidence for such initiatives was all too tangible on our visit. Marcos, for example, worked from the age of 9 selling food and lifting stones in a quarry. Through NATRAS, he became aware of how to claim his rights and defend them, and he is now studying for a medical degree at university - the type of story that motivates campaigners to keep up their work.

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