



## Sometimes Dreams Do Come True

A few years ago, I saw the movie "Field of Dreams." The movie gave me an important message that I have never forgotten: sometimes it is necessary to dream the impossible in order to see it become a reality.

Eight months ago I was a pastoral intern standing in the town of Veracruz, Nicaragua watching a dozen kids playing. They were participating in a seminar offered by the Alliance at CENFAMA, discovering their own creativity and self-esteem through music and nature. The space we were using was just big enough for a dozen or so kids and the five teens who were helping us. I thought about how many more children there were in congested Managua who would benefit from such opportunities, and all the neglected children right here in this little town that could be served in a more regular way, if only there were more adequate space and people to run the program.

Suddenly, as if in an instant, I saw a building that looked like a school right in the midst of the trees. There were classrooms and an outdoor place to eat with picnic benches. As soon as I saw it, it was gone. But a few minutes later, Don Schopfer, Alliance program director, came over to me and

looked in that direction and said, "We've been thinking about building some classrooms here, maybe with a dormitory and an outdoor breezeway for eating and doing activities when it's really hot." I knew then it would happen one day, and knew that there was a lot to be done for that dream to become a reality. But I knew.

As we talked more, Don shared the hope that perhaps groups of college students from the states could come down to participate in the building, and in the process develop a sensitivity and concern for the basic needs of their brothers and sisters in Nicaragua. I began to think about how my alma mater, Villanova University, had been running service trips over semester breaks for years, and how wonderful it would be to begin to see the vision take shape working alongside students from Villanova.

I returned to the U.S. with that vision planted in my heart, and a few phone calls and meetings later, we had a delegation of students and staff from Villanova going to Nicaragua for Christmas break! Along the way, we picked up a few alumni, and students from RPI and Vanderbilt as well. This group, some of whom had never met until we arrived in Nicaragua, worked for 11 days in

sometimes sweltering heat digging and pouring the foundations for new classroom buildings on the CENFAMA site.

One day as I was digging the vision returned, but this time, it wasn't just buildings, it was classrooms full of children, shouting and laughing and playing. The dream was alive, pulsating in me, and I saw it as if I were in the midst of it. It lasted a little bit longer this time, but then it was gone again. When we finished our work, we had accomplished more than we anticipated, two foundations laid in 10 days. What we did was truly "foundational."

There is still much to do to bring the vision to fruition, and the need for financial resources and volunteers to help make it a reality. But what happened during our work trip and in the months to follow tells me to trust the vision. As we worked, children from the village began to come, to see what was happening, to be with us, to dream of what might be here some day. And now there is a preschool and after-school program being run in the existing buildings at CENFAMA. So we must continue building. "If we build it, they will come. They will surely come." ✽

*Ed Lis is a Villanova graduate and former Assistant to the Dean in Villanova's College of Engineering.*

### *SCHOOL from page 1*

area. Some parents are tempted to withdraw their children and enroll them in our school. We discourage this. As a free community preparatory school program for unschooled children from poverty-level families, our goal is to give as many children as possible the opportunity to continue their studies for a period of time until the economic condition of the family improves.

The CENFAMA educational program offers instruction in five sessions, each of five weeks duration. The first five-week session focuses on teaching children basic preschool skills such as learning numbers and letters, names of things, how to write their names, and encouragement to express themselves in a group. In the following sessions, topics include health, family, community, and nature.

At the end of our first five-week session we had about 50 preschoolers enrolled in three levels for 4, 5, and 6-year-olds, and 15 children in first grade. After each five-week session, we evaluate student progress, rearrange classes according to ability levels, and matriculate newly enrolled students as our financial resources allow. To increase our enrollment



*Waiting for class to begin*

even more, we need to hire teachers and provide classroom space with furniture and supplies. We need your help to do this. I hope many of you will want to sponsor a child with your tax exempt donation of \$20 a month. You will provide a good education, health, dental and nutritional services to the dear little ones. Pages 4 and 5 of this newsletter show some

of these beautiful children. Many are gifted with quick minds and hidden talents that need expression and time to mature.

One tiny brown-haired girl, named Christina, has come to all the classes but has not spoken a word. She will need a private tutor to encourage her to speak and to participate with the other children. During the school year, we hope to discover the special skills and gifts still hidden and encourage the children to share them with their classmates.

The staff and volunteers have a deep sense of commitment to the task of helping the children to learn and develop their skills and self-confidence. Their enthusiasm is seen on their faces when they are singing and participating in class activities. When they give the right answer and are rewarded with the applause of their classmates, their sheer joy illuminates their faces and our hearts.

We want you to share in their joy and ours by giving them a helping hand of hope to work for a better, healthier, and more meaningful life as they grow in knowledge and dignity. ✽

## CENFAMA – The Inevitable Solution

The critical need to deal with the problem of children and the family in Nicaraguan society became apparent with the increasing numbers of destitute, abandoned and neglected children in the streets and neighborhoods. Large segments of the youthful population are malnourished and unschooled, while idle adolescents remain unskilled and unemployable. They seem doomed to inactivity and boredom with little incentive and still less opportunity to be involved in their education or some other

worthwhile activity. We have found a large number of preschool and grade school children from the poorest families in Veracruz who are not enrolled in any school because of parental apathy or lack of family economic resources. Hundreds of children of all ages remain unschooled because many come from large single parent families, with limited income. Most parents have little or no formal education and thus do not prepare their children to enter school. Since 1995, CENFAMA has been giving day camp activities to groups of children

from poor families. Other seminars were given to local youth groups. The need for expansion into a free community school was inevitable. The majority of the children have no access to basic medical or dental care, and suffer unnecessarily from the most preventable health care problems. Your generosity can help us to expand our services in health and education through our integrated and comprehensive approach to the needs of children and families. Following is a list of our current initiatives and how you might help.

### *Deeds*

Our 1997 program included a field visit in January by 16 university students and advisors from the U.S. The work team provided the manual labor to install four new classroom foundations as the first phase of our expansion of facilities that will allow us to increase school enrollment to 200 children. Our plan is to utilize volunteer work teams from the U.S. or Europe to complete the construction by the end of this year.

Since March CENFAMA has conducted preschool classes for 50 children and first/second grade for 33 more. We have received approval from the Ministry of Education for our new free community school, and they have provided preschool tables and chairs for 24 children. None were available for other grades.

In April we set up our dental clinic and had our first weekly visit from a local dentist volunteering his time to do check-ups and extractions. By the end of April the dentist completed over 100 examinations and 30 extractions.

In May we initiated a special education project to tutor small groups of both advanced and slow learners. We have enlisted the volunteer services of teenagers from the local parish youth group and a private high school.

In May we organized adult education classes to instruct parents about good health, hygiene and nutrition practices. We will also begin to offer adult literacy classes and tutoring to adolescents on a one-to-one basis.

### *Needs*

***We need funding to purchase construction materials and pay the operating expenses of housing and feeding volunteers.***

***We need more preschool tables and chairs and individual desks for grade school students in order to meet our current enrollment.***

***We need donated dental equipment and supplies, and funding for medications.***

***We need funding to purchase educational materials and hire two of our current volunteers to coordinate the program.***

***We need funding to purchase materials and provide ongoing classes.***

### ***MANGO from page 1***

The children adapt quickly to the rhythm of the class and soon all become friends. Their very protected and isolated life did little to prepare them for school and the outside community life. Many of the children did not know their full names, nor those of their parents, or where they lived. They had no sense of time, place or space, letters or numbers, and all were withdrawn and afraid to speak. This lasted only a week for most, or two for the more timid. Teacher José now has the challenge to bring them together as a disciplined learning group. He is doing very well because the children are responding to his methods by learning how to be disciplined, courteous, respectful of others,

and attentive to the teacher. They are learning new games and songs, and how to read and write. They are discovering their identity, and becoming more aware of creation, their environment, and family and community life around them.

Each child is unique and precious. A few touch my heart in a special way. Danny is one who spontaneously attracts a touch of joy in his smiling pixie face, and delights us with his quick-minded, enthusiastic responses. His tiny body seems to be full of joy.

As the end of our first five-week session approached, we could see that the children had become comfortable in the class and eager to learn new material. We expect the children will be prepared to enter the first

grade by the end of the year. Our free community school can continue to educate them through second grade. Hopefully the parents will have the awareness and be prepared to make economic and personal sacrifices to continue their children's formal education beyond the second grade. This is the only way that they can ever hope to be prepared to rise above the poverty in which they live and be able to seek a better quality of life in their young adulthood.

We know we have opened the door to their future. We pray that they will wholeheartedly be able to enter into a new life of learning with a hopeful vision that their expectations planted under the mango tree will bear fruit and will come true. ✽

## Like Pulling Teeth

The first visit to the dentist is often a terrifying experience. Yet 30 of our preschoolers and first graders marched straight to the chair without flinching. The children had arrived with their mothers, brothers, sisters, friends and observers in what amounted to a community event with all anxiously crowding around to learn about the free service at CENFAMA.

We welcomed our new friend, Dr. Elmer Villalta to CENFAMA. He has agreed to give two hours every Thursday morning to the children. The first morning 30 examinations revealed the need for 10 extractions, which were scheduled for the next week, and prompted the purchase of required supplies. The examinations also revealed that many children needed cleanings and fillings. Hopefully, we will get additional donated equipment and supplies allowing Dr. Elmer to offer full dental services to the children.

Dr. Carroccio, our friend and donor from Bethesda, Maryland, may feel nostalgic at seeing the photo of his first dental chair purchased over 50 years ago and now being used again at CENFAMA, a few thousand miles away in Nicaragua.

Our classes in health education will teach the children to care for their teeth and develop good habits of oral hygiene that can prevent many other illnesses of the eyes, ears and throat.

The following Thursday the 10 patients arrived with fears and tears. The sight of the needle put a few in shock. Most handled the experience with courage and peace, but one tiny girl fought to the end and resisted all efforts, screaming "I'm going to die!" Over the promptings of her mother, the dentist and several bystanders, she won the battle—alive to fight another day.

Dr. Elmer's visit was a huge success and very much appreciated by us and the families who could not afford this service at a public or private clinic. We will continue this service so that all the children can be examined and treated, and it will be expanded to include cleanings and fillings when we acquire the needed donated equipment and supplies.

Dr. Elmer departed with the thanks and applause of all who were grateful for his dedicated service. Before departing, he remarked that the second Vatican Council clearly states our mission in the social apostolate is one that calls all of us to action on behalf of the poor. We appreciate his presence and dedicated service at CENFAMA. We look forward to many more occasions to provide good dental care to the children of Veracruz. ❄

## Center for Children and the Family—the childr

*These children are some of the dear little ones that have been fortunate enough to receive classes at our Center for Children and the Family. Most would never have developed the learning skills needed to survive in life if they had not enrolled in our free community school.*



*Fluoride treatments f*

*They need dental care and medical treatment!*



*Dr. Elmer Villalta gives two hours of invaluable service each week to help promote and improve the dental hygiene of the children at CENFAMA*

**a, the program, the urgency—the time is now!**



*These children will help keep their teeth healthy*



*\$20 a month will sponsor  
another child at our  
Center for Children  
and the Family.*

*Don't wait any longer!  
Give the gift of education  
to a child in need today.*



*These children need  
our help and yours!*

*They need books, crayons, pencils, and learning tools!*



## Reflections from Visiting Volunteers—January 1997

### Phenomenal Teamwork

While my friends spent Christmas break skiing, partying and relaxing, I opted to participate in a Villanova Volunteers service trip, which was sponsored by the Alliance for Communities in Action, to Veracruz, Nicaragua. I have traveled considerably around the world and must admit Nicaragua is one of the most gorgeous countries I have visited, with its abundance of flowers, lakes, volcanos, and wonderful people.

We stayed in the middle of an impoverished village. Actually, the country is full of poverty, as Nicaragua is the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. Previous to this experience, I had served in Mexico and here at home in a few poor urban neighborhoods, but I never saw anything like Nicaragua. There were shacks all around us, full of dirty children with little clothing. I think about 75% of the population is under the age of 15. This trip was undoubtedly an eye opener for my fellow Villanova students who had not yet experienced poverty.

Our job was to build a foundation for two classrooms that will be used to teach the children and adults of the surrounding community. Due to the most phenomenal teamwork I have experienced, we completed two foundations instead of just one. Although we did not have access to any sophisticated tools, my co-workers made sure the labor was



*Villanova volunteers mixing cement for new classroom foundations at CENFAMA*

never tedious. We cleared the area of big trees and rocks. We dug holes and trenches. We bent steel reinforcement and wired it together. Finally, there was the mixing and pouring of cement, using shovels. We never worked so hard in our lives.

The children of Veracruz watched us morning, noon, and night. At the end of the day, we were exhausted and ridden with dirt, but we still played with our new-found friends. They even managed to befriend the non-Spanish speakers in our group. I became rather attached to some of the kids I met there. In particular, I remember Claudia. She was the most polite, happy, and fun 7-year-old I

have met in any part of the world. We played together for hours at a time, and she brought me lots of happiness. I felt very welcome by her entire family, especially the grandmother. Claudia was one of 47 grandchildren. I wonder what the future will bring for Claudia and the other 46.

As I look back and reflect, I remember an amazing two weeks in a gorgeous country. Memories of Nicaragua continue to brighten my days, while reminding me to praise God for all that he has given me. I hope the progress in Veracruz can continue. \*

*Patricia Hicks majored in Spanish at Villanova University*

### The World Around Us

Simplicity. Happiness. Love. Fullness of life. This is what I found in Nicaragua, both in the Nicaraguan people and those who participated in the service project. The ambiance of Nicaragua was soothing; it provided such a deep contrast to our everyday existence. Life's petty worries seemed to disappear. There is something about unadulterated happiness that is so inviting.

Distinct aspects of our service project seemed to have melded together into fond memories. We went to lay the foundation for two school buildings, and that we did. But the two weeks in Nicaragua were so much more. The barriers of class, race, religion, and sex were all wiped away as we were welcomed into the Alliance's arms at the airport. Our group grew together, well facilitated by acceptance of the world around us.

The numerous excursions to Granada, the Isletas, the Volcano, Masaya, Managua, and even to the ice cream shop, provided more avenues in which our group could grow and experience the Nicaraguan culture. Each

member of the group has their particular fondest memory. For me, the visit to the orphanage was amazing. The children were so trusting and so full of love. They greeted us with a hug and held onto our hand for the duration of the visit. We did nothing in particular, except to be there as guests. At the time, I thought of what a great service it was to sacrifice a free day to brighten the eyes of those less fortunate, but once I had time to reflect and absorb that day, I realized that they provided just as much, if not more, happiness and love to our lives.

We worked hard, but learned a great deal about ourselves and about each other. Each of our lives, in one way or another, was changed by this experience. The perception of the world around us became more global, more realistic, more attuned to what we need, to grow more fully as individuals. I thank you for providing this experience and helping us to more fully realize our life goals. \*

*Chris Vitale is a senior majoring in Engineering at Villanova University*

### My Calling in Life

Being in Nicaragua with everything we saw and experienced, I honestly believe I have found my call. I had thought since sophomore/junior year in high school that I wanted to be a nurse, but I never really felt like that was what God was calling me to do. But sometime in those last few days in Nicaragua, I felt the call. Maybe it was when I was helping Maureen clean the cut on Danny's cheek, knowing that he was scared to death, too afraid to even talk. Or maybe it was the love and appreciation from Angelina when I cleaned and dressed that major gash on her arm. Or maybe it was when we went to the neighbor's house to help the woman with the cesarean; seeing how they couldn't afford the proper medicine, how scared she was from the pain. All I could do was translate what Katie B. was saying and try to offer some comfort and advice. Yet maybe it was the trip that we took to the hospital in Masaya. Seeing the people there and how much love they needed and how many

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## Changed Forever

Simply put, the experience of working in Nicaragua has changed me forever. I have come back full of inspiration and hope. I was deeply affected and inspired by three different groups of people—the spirit of the Nicaraguan people, the compassion and work ethic of the Villanova students, and the dedication of Alliance staff, Dick Schopfer and Ed Lis.

Since my return the faces of the people of Nicaragua, especially the children, are still etched firmly in my mind. I will never forget their spirit or their simple goodness. Their sense of community and family is amazing and inspiring. I keep a few reminders of Nicaragua on my desk at work. There is a picture of Domingo, clad in a Villanova sweatshirt, and me sitting on a bench and just laughing. Never before have I felt so good about giving than when I gave Domingo that sweatshirt. Also on my desk is a hand-painted

cone-shaped toy which was given to me by a wonderful little girl named Claudia. I tried to teach Claudia how to count in English, but she ended up teaching me a lot more about the simple joys of giving.

As an administrator at Villanova, I have volunteered to serve as advisor on several service trips. I think that I could honestly say that no group in the history of Villanova worked as hard as this one. Two of the major tasks of the project—digging and mixing cement—were very labor-intensive by nature. We were exhausted at the end of each work day. This exhaustion, however, did not deter the students from giving of themselves so selflessly to the children after work. Their compassion and capacity to give was truly inspiring. Many students in the group, as well as myself, had a difficult time adjusting when we returned to Villanova, and I think that speaks volumes about the kind of people we encountered in Nicaragua.

I cannot begin to thank the Alliance enough

for giving us the wonderful opportunity to serve in Nicaragua. They not only provided us with a great setting to do God's work, but also with two great role models. We were all touched by Dick's courage and strength to push on in the face of difficult times. We were equally energized by Ed's boundless enthusiasm and gentle good nature. They both provided us with incredible insights on the political, economic and social struggles of the Nicaraguan people.

Lastly, I was amazed at the beauty of the landscape of Nicaragua. It is impressive and we were fortunate enough to be able to visit the Masaya volcano and Lake Nicaragua. The beauty of the landscape, however, is hardly equal to the beauty of the people of Nicaragua. They hold a special place in my heart. I hope to return soon to the place that has changed me forever. \*

*Tom Mogan is the Associate  
Director of Leadership Development  
at Villanova University*

## Our Mission in Life

One night in January, some of us were discussing the poverty all around us and how we were feeling about it. Later that night I wrote this entry: "God did not cause poverty...the poverty here is from the evil done by humans and it can be overcome with the goodness in humans. Our mission in life is to care for our fellow brothers and sisters. Ann quoted Mother Teresa in prayer tonight, 'The more you have, the less you can give.' This is so true. In our society we are clouded by things, making it so easy to lose perspective on what is *most important* in life. We are each other's keepers and owe it to one another to care for each other. God needs us, we are His hands, feet, eyes, and hearts. Tonight I pray for all my friends and family who have not had opportunities like this to see, really see, what is most important."

Our last workday on the site: "We did it...we completed the classroom foundations! After we finished we had leftover cement so we took it down the road to fill in a large pothole. We poured the cement and then wrote "1-8-97 Villanova" in large letters. Then we hung around playing and talking with the kids. A few girls came back to the site with me and we sat under the big mango tree learning English."

Our last day: "After we got back from Masaya today we gathered the kids for lunch outside our house. Mariana and Maria made a delicious lunch of yucca, rice, and chicharon for them. They sat at the long tables and devoured their lunches! Afterward we were playing around the house. I took a break from running around with the kids and sat with Dick for a little while to just take it all in. As I was sitting there, I looked up and saw six white doves fly overhead. Peace." \*

*Becky Umlaud is a 1996 Nursing graduate from Villanova University*



*Villanova volunteers and advisors take time out for a group photo at CENFAMA*

## Better Equipped to Live

On a two-week service trip, 16 people experienced the poverty, culture and beauty of Nicaragua. This trip impacted my life.

The trip began when everyone got together for a prayer service. Candles were lit and we reflected on our own light and the light of others. "Lord, help me to do what I can, to understand, to learn, to love."

Nicaragua is gorgeous, but there are many dilapidated houses. Some people live in one room shacks that look worse than old toolsheds, but yet they act happy, even though many of their children have to beg for money.

We dug up trees and rocks. I don't think I've ever been so dirty in my life... José, who is active in the community, played guitar. He has written songs about injustice, about the oppression of women, and about street children. He's excellent... As we worked

today there were adorable children playing around us... they are so trusting of us. I am so exhausted, but we finished the projected goal today.

Five of us went to visit a hospital. It was dirty and disturbing. The infant mortality rate here is 45% and each woman has 6.7 children. Children were casted in gauze and they handled blood with bare hands because they just didn't have the supplies. I was very disturbed and confused... All the children kissed us goodbye; one little girl was crying. It is hard to be back, to live like we used to after what we have seen. I notice so much wastefulness. Even though it is difficult, I think that I am better equipped to live my life in a better way because of my experience. \*

*Ann deGruy is a senior majoring in  
Physical Therapy at Villanova University*

## Rapid Growth

A few months ago I returned from Nicaragua, a country that changed my life and caused me to grow more than I ever imagined possible in two weeks. I went with a group of Villanova students and other special people like my brother, my friend's father, three graduates, an advisor, and a friend. This unique group of 16 people came together and worked and lived as a community unlike any other I have known.

We lived in a building with a tile floor, painted walls, and a gate; a palace in the midst of poverty and squalor. We played and laughed and fed dirty, barefoot children who had the most beautiful smiles. I cleaned an infected cut on a little boy's face, while frustration and disbelief burned in my heart at the lack of medical care available to these people. Perhaps the most shocking memory was visiting the shack of a woman who had a cesarean-section the previous week and was experiencing complications. We entered the little shack, which had a dirt floor, no inside plumbing or running water, and a pit that was used for a stove. We did what we could for her with our rudimentary supplies, but we left her without antibiotics and without certainty that she would be able to see a doctor. Perhaps the most lasting effect of this experience is the realization of how little is necessary to live and how insignificant my problems really are. ✽

*Maureen Finan is a senior majoring in Nursing at Villanova University*



### CALLING from page 6

resources they were lacking. The things we take for granted here are so scarce there. All the medical supplies, like gloves and gauze we use for practice in the College of Nursing, they don't have even for use on actual patients. That really affected me.

Or maybe what touched me the most was seeing the health of the kids who came to play on our work site everyday, knowing that they probably only bathed a couple times a

## God in Nature

Stepping off the plane in Nicaragua and feeling the warm air hit me was awesome. I remember feeling the air while riding in the back of the pickup truck. When we arrived at the site, I loved the fact that we were right in the middle of the town, just a five-minute walk to buy soda, and the children lived right around the corner.

During my two-week stay, I experienced team work like never before. We all worked so hard and so well together, and had so much fun at the same time. The children were always there watching us and ready to jump in to give a helping hand at any moment. Once, I was digging a hole and in order to do so I was in the hole. Ana Maria, my 8-year-old friend, was standing above me keeping me company with a beautiful smile on her face.

The presence of God was truly with us. I felt God everywhere. Our days started and ended with a person from our group leading a reflection, and then five or ten minutes of silence to reflect on our day—those were my favorite parts of the day. I could see God in nature, in each one helping the other out, but most importantly in the smiles of the children and in the smiles they contagiously gave to us.

Those two weeks will always remain in a special part of my heart as a time of service, learning, and growing as a human being and as a child of God. ✽

*Enriqueta Donovan is a sophomore majoring in Human Services at Villanova University*

week, if that; seeing that they wore the same clothes everyday, no matter how dirty they were, and not because it was their favorite outfit, but because it was their only outfit; seeing how their teeth were rotting out because they didn't brush; seeing a little boy squat down outside the fence of our work site to go to the bathroom and knowing that another little boy could walk through it and contract a horrible parasite. Lack of health education is such a visible problem there.

Through all this I felt that God was really calling me to be a nurse. But there is something more to it than that. It is not for me to be working in some private practice hospital for the well-off, employed and insured. Rather I am sure my call is to work with people who are suffering and struggling to live day to day. I'm not saying that the well-off don't deserve health care, but I am saying that I think my call is elsewhere. I really don't see myself working in the States when I graduate from college. I see myself working back in Nicaragua, or another developing country, as a public health nurse teaching people how to care for themselves and their children. ✽

*Katie Schroth is a sophomore majoring in Nursing at Villanova University*

# Alliance for Communities in Action

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*The Alliance is a non-profit organization that links groups and individuals for self-help projects in economically disadvantaged communities primarily in Latin America. The Alliance assists these communities by securing funds and appropriate technology for projects in shelter housing, agriculture, potable water, health, cooperatives, and microenterprises.*

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