



Letter From Nicaragua

An American teacher's diary recreates conversations with former Contras and Sandinistas who think the war isn't over.

by Sharon Harris

Old vehicles with faded red paint line the curb. A few of these cars are marked "taxi." The drivers lazily talk to one another, waiting for the next flight to arrive and the bargaining to begin again.

I am in Nicaragua, the faculty sponsor for a volunteer student group assisting an Adventist Development and Relief Agency (ADRA) project. It is June 29, 1992. Fifteen hours earlier I had left the Ontario, California, airport. Before long, the ADRA truck pulls into the parking lot and we begin our journey.

I soon learn that foreigners can expect to be robbed sometime during their stay. Contra and Sandinista soldiers unhappy with the current political system still roam the jungles, and earthquakes are as common as in southern California.

June 30

We travel to our home base, Somoto, just south of the Honduras border along the Pan American highway. The town is so peaceful it is hard to

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realize that just two years ago this area was involved in some of the worst guerrilla warfare in the world.

The students I am traveling with are interested in the Pan American highway. "Could we actually drive home from here?"

"Sure," I respond, "with a vehicle we could drive the Pan American highway through Honduras, El Salvador, Guatemala, and Mexico." Somehow the idea that we could drive home assures them that we are not really so far away.

We feel privileged staying in a "hotel" across from the city square. It has a wonderful veranda where we enjoy the rocking chairs for our morning and evening worships. We have a little zoo in the back courtyard featuring an indigenous monkey, deer, and parrots that serve as our morning alarm clock.

The rooms are complete with bedbugs, millipedes, scorpions, and a resident rat. We stuff our duffel bags between the five beds in the "girls" room. The beds are made of wooden slats covered with cotton pads. The shower is a faucet above our heads with plenty of cold water. We are told there is no hot water in all of Nicaragua. The toilet is contemporary with a few adaptations: there is no lid on which to sit. This minor inconvenience will no doubt become a hassle, as I am sure we will each experience the inevitable diarrhea. The back of the toilet is

open so that we can turn on a faucet high above to fill the tank. Then we must reach down and pull out the stopper to flush.

July 1

Today includes a one-hour drive and five-kilometer hike to reach a remote *camposina*, or farm. Our drivers speed through every curve, every bump, every river. We pass farmers eking out an existence by planting corn and beans. Their homes are formed with twigs and mud. Inside are floors of hardened mud. Seating area is provided with tree stumps and carved logs. Chickens, pigs, and cats wander at will in and out of the homes.

Our journey by foot along a steep ridge and down into a lush valley ends at a small hut used as a school. The school mothers immediately appear from everywhere, eager to talk about their children and their families. Today the discussion is about breast feeding. The Nicaraguan ADRA health educator grabs her own breast to demonstrate feeding an infant and the women giggle with embarrassment.

The men are outside waiting. Through translation, I understand their discussion centers on women—their own women, other women, and women they hope to have. These men cannot read, have no jobs, no money, and little if any land to garden. Yet they have the ability to attract a woman and to feel the love that they can share.



I gaze across the mountains and valleys, all the way to Honduras and El Salvador. The foreground of green turns to blue. I am told that in the hidden valleys are countless land mines. Only a few months ago a farmer's shovel struck a mine. He was killed instantly.

Later, I meet an ex-Sandinista soldier. Hector is now an ADRA health worker. He poses for a picture with another ADRA worker who was formerly a Contra. Hector assures me, without emotion, that if they had met during the war, they would have killed each other.

Hector insists he did not want to fight, but the Sandinistas came to his high school and told him and his classmates they had to fight. He emphasizes that he had no choice. "They would have killed me."

Recalling his comrades, a certain nostalgia sweeps over him. As they marched through thick rain forests, he truly experienced friendship. But the price was high. He watched many of his friends killed by guns or swept down river in torrents. Hector, like most Nicaraguans, does not believe the war is over.

July 3

Our hotel is north of the town square, the cathedral sits kitty-corner from us on the east side, and the school sits on the west. Each morning and evening the cathedral bells toll to remind parishioners it is time for Mass. The square becomes quiet. I enjoy the sounds of music as the congregations lift their voices in praise.

During the day I am constantly reminded that the poor are controlled by the edicts of the Catholic Church. At the campo I listen to the health lecture on birth control. The women sit on a filthy plywood ledge in a mud and wood structure with a tin roof. The average Nicaraguan woman has eight children. Many of the children filling this room have bellies bloated from malnutrition. Puddles form under different children as they play. Their clothes reek of urine. Corina, the health educator, informs the women of the importance of family planning. She emphasizes that the children already born need the resources and attention parents can give to assure health. Corina urges the women to choose a group leader who can be the liaison between the child survival project and the *camposina*.

The women start arguing. Some become angry and refuse to be involved with birth control. A young girl in her 20s volunteers to be the leader, but

her mother immediately refuses to let her have any part in the program. An older woman without any teeth shrieks at Corina. A priest has told the woman if she uses birth control that she is sinning and cannot even enter the church. Another woman accuses Corina of encouraging the women in the room to sin. She argues that the Bible clearly states that any form of contraception is a sin.

Finally, a mother of six, who appears to be in her early 30s, quietly says that she will be the group leader to promote birth control. I marvel at this woman's courage.

July 4

This is our first Sabbath in Nicaragua. We go to a church nearly an hour's drive away on dirt roads. The church has four wood walls with holes for windows, a wood roof, and wood floor. This is the cleanest building I have seen in Nicaragua. The people are tidy, alert, and full of smiles. The anger and despair I have seen throughout the countryside is missing from these faces.

Adventism has brought education, not sought to control it. For these people the Adventist Church is liberating and educational. Interestingly, my students in America have not shared this experience, for they have found the church to be stifling and sometimes a hindrance.

July 5

Today, I go to the post office to mail a letter. Pedro wears his typical morning smile and delivers an English greeting. "Good morning, how are you?" He pronounces each word carefully and beams when he is finished. Pedro, in his early 30s, has already spent one-third of his life behind bars. He refused to fight with the Sandinista army and paid with 10 years of his life. Many of those years were spent in solitary confinement. That's where he learned English, in prison by himself. Now he walks up and down the street smiling, talking to everyone

and speaking in English as often as he can. Somehow this 5' 3" brown-skinned man with wire-rimmed glasses and big white teeth expects more than a God who will alleviate suffering.

Today we go inside the homes and teach the women how to cook the foods that we are planting. The first family that we meet has eight children. The oldest daughter is pregnant by her stepfather. She is only 16 and is expecting her first child in three months. My students and I watch with amazement as mother and daughter compete for the father's attention and affection.

Tonight our worship hour takes on new questions. How does God view this wife, husband, and daughter relationship? How does God judge a 16-year-old girl and her 30-year-old mother who are desperate for food and desperate for love?

Trying to understand this relationship brings us to the age-old question, "Who will get to heaven? What is required?"

One student muses that maybe you just have to keep the Ten Commandments. But this comment results in an obvious question: "Does that mean this father, mother, and daughter will not be saved because they have committed adultery?"

Perhaps, my students agree, we are trying to make it too difficult. Will God save people simply because they are "safe to save"—because they are teachable in God's perfect ways?

Are these people "safe" to take to heaven? Will they be teachable? Do you think that God can teach us even after we get to heaven? The students are not sure.

The Farewell Party

After six weeks, our time in Somoto is over. We have built gardens, trained families to cook, delivered food and clothes throughout the countryside, and helped weigh babies in child survival clinics. The community with which we worked throws a party to bid us farewell and a safe journey back to the States. We know without question that being Western does not mean being the best. Through the eyes of these desperate, war-torn farmers we have seen another glimpse of God.