



Saving the world means fixing myself

BY RHONDA SCHOFIELD

As airport staff members pitched my overstuffed luggage on top of the tourism van, I couldn't help but wonder what I had gotten myself into. The heavy humid air suffused my senses: the burning scent of the nearby landfill wafted faintly, voices from the crowded street called out, and I stood silently, unsure what else to do.

I was tired. I was hungry. I was jet-lagged, and not a single word of the flowing native language was intelligible to me. Rain had started to fall on the Central American street corner where I stood, and it was swiftly growing dark. A year and a half of planning had brought our group of 19 teenagers, young adults and young-at-heart adults to Managua, Nicaragua, but no amount of planning could have prepared us for our two-week experience.

My United Church upbringing has instilled two deep longings within me: a longing for social justice and a longing to make a difference. The prospect of the trip satisfied both those desires. What I didn't quite realize, however, was the impact this experience would have on me. Rather selfishly, and perhaps foolishly, I'd hoped not only to help build a preschool classroom for an impoverished barrio but also to placate my intense personal desire to rebuild the world. I'd hoped that lugging a few bricks, levelling some ground, mixing some cement and painting some zinc would calm my restless spirit. I'd hoped that this feel-good work would, well, make me feel good. And in one sense it

did. But upon returning, the positive feeling left me as quickly as the sun set on my first Central American evening.

For two weeks we were steeped in unfathomable poverty but also in unexpected optimism. Under the guidance of Gonzalo Duarte of *Compañeros*, a Canadian organization that connects western volunteers with Nicaraguan communities, we constructed a classroom from a pile of dirt and also developed ourselves, listening to the stories of locals who held on to hope in lieu of material possessions. Over the duration of our stay, I experienced emotional highs and lows as we navigated the volcanic landscapes, tropical plants and the active Pacific Ocean — but nothing quite as heartbreaking as our last day on the worksite.

Saying adios was harder than I anticipated. For two weeks, we bonded with the locals, made fun of each other and laughed until tears flowed. We made fools of ourselves in soccer matches and had access to an infinite number of hugs from the schoolchildren. We witnessed poverty — intense poverty — and we were somehow expected to return home with this new knowledge. As we bid our farewells to the workers, I found myself questioning everything: How can I have so much when they have so little? How is it that I struggle with my faith when theirs seems so strong? How can I wonder where God is in this situation while the people of Nicaragua freely demonstrate God's presence through their spirits, generosity and thankfulness?

As the sun's heat shone down on me that last day on the worksite, I paused for a moment before driving away. The children called our names, giggling with their Spanish accents. The street vendors hailed us, trying to make vital sales. The birds above continued their clamour, squawking back and forth, competing to be heard. But above all this was the undeniable sound of God knocking on my heart. How could I say goodbye to this? How could I return home knowing these stories, knowing these people and their struggle?

It turns out I am not that strong. It turns out I cannot walk away without looking back. As I tossed all that was familiar to me into the care of airport staff who rough-handled my belongings, I committed myself to the care of Nicaragua. My aspirations for fixing the world were quickly detoured as I realized *my* world is the one that needs fixing. Just as the people of Nicaragua are thankful for the little they have, I too have learned to see hope and God's spirit in this new-found darkness.

Rhonda Schofield is a religious studies student at the University of Prince Edward Island.