

10 Days in Nicaragua: A Lesson in Human Nature

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"The greatest risk in action is the risk of revelation, and that is also action's greatest joy. No one can know us fully, not even ourselves, but when we act, something of our inner mystery often emerges, and it can shock or delight us when it does." – Parker Palmer

I knew it would be a challenging experience, but I could never have imagined the extent to which it would push all of my boundaries, and how it would ultimately expand my mind and soul.

From March 9-18, 25—12 from Stittsville and 13 from Walton, Ontario—travelled to Nicaragua to work in one of the poorest neighbourhoods of the capital city of Managua. Ten adults, and 15 teens coming together for a common purpose. The trip was led by Companeros, a non-profit organization run by Gonzalo Duarte—a Canadian living in Nicaragua whose sole purpose is to improve the lives of the people there. In 10 years, more than 1,000 participants from Canada, the US, and beyond have made this trip to Nicaragua, still one of the poorest countries in the western hemisphere with most people living on less than \$2 per day. In the six months leading up to the trip, our group talked about what to expect. But nothing could have prepared us for the complete assault on our senses that would occur, challenging our reality and everything we were accustomed to. Young kids sleeping on the street. People living on garbage dumps. Barbed wire everywhere. The heat. The smells. Most people live on next to nothing, on dirt floors and in tin shacks. Natural disasters, corrupt governments, and wars have torn this country apart over the last 40 years.

We were divided up into groups of three or four and hosted by various Nicaraguan families, interacting with our hosts mainly over meals. Despite the language barrier, we managed to communicate, with lots of effort on both sides. The first two days were spent mainly becoming acquainted with others in the group, some sightseeing, getting the lay of the land, and preparing for the work week to come. Every day, all 25 of us would congregate at Casa Blanca—Companeros' headquarters—where we would discuss and plan the day ahead. The main group was divided into smaller groups and assigned specific jobs in and around the Gabriela Mistral school, based on our experience and how we could best contribute.

Some were put on house-building teams. Some painted huge, colorful murals. Others went to work building a security wall around the school—digging trenches, mixing cement, laying stones, and building reinforcement bars. Some taught English. After short stints chipping stone, moving rocks and debris, and building re-bar, I finally found my niche for the week—building book shelves and room dividers with Jack, a retired minister and experienced carpenter. In all cases, we worked alongside local Nicaraguans. They were somewhat guarded, skeptical, and distant at first. It is human nature to distrust and fear what you don't know. But within a day, once they saw how hard we worked, how happy we were to be there, and that we were there to help, language and cultural barriers just melted away. It didn't take long before we were laughing and joking with each other, and making real progress on all fronts.

Perhaps the most powerful moment of the entire trip for me was when we first arrived at the school on the first work day. All the school kids, families, workers, and teachers were gathered to greet us. As I sat with all these people, the bright-eyed school kids smiling up at me, fascinated, watching my every move, trying to connect, it really hit home why I was there, and how our group would make an impact on their lives, not only in what we would build, but also the relationships that we would form with them. I felt

love and goodness in an almost dizzying way. We had been talking about it for months, but all the talk could not compare with real life. These kids have lived such hardship, and yet there is still goodness and hope in their little faces. It was incredibly inspiring.

The schedule was intense and relentless—between the job site, group outings, discussion, preparation—we were on the go for 15 hours a day. I would never have freely chosen such packed schedule, but the total cultural immersion and letting go of our ways of doing things would lead to incredible individual growth.

On the fourth work day I decided to stay late and prep materials and plan for the next day. Then the local workers began to congregate around me for some reason. My “right brain” wanted to keep doing what I was doing—planning for the next day—but I forced myself to be in the moment with the others and just hang out with them. Turned out to be one of the best communal and connected moments of the trip as we let off steam, laughing and joking with one another, despite the language barrier. Just people united under a common purpose. Although both cultures seem so different at first, once you scratch the surface and put in the effort, and there is a commonality that binds us together. We all respond to love, kindness, enthusiasm, and smiles. The more you put yourself out there, the more you get back.

At the end of the final work day, we toured all the projects to see the progress that had been made. Three houses built and about 400 feet of the security wall erected. Two beautiful murals had been created. Six shelving units and four room dividers. Most importantly, a whole lot of love and respect had grown between two very different cultures. When it was finally time to say goodbye, it was an incredibly heart-wrenching experience and it hit me much harder than I expected. In a few short days we had become so close with these people. Lots of tears all around. And on the final night with our host family, they threw a goodbye party for us. A simple and modest affair by our standards, but they all make such an effort and are so proud. It is not what they have, or how much they have, but rather the people and relationships they value the most. Unlike North Americans, this culture values living in and for the moment. These people have so little, and have been through such hardship, yet they seem happy and hopeful.

After the group left, I ended up staying another week to see more of the country. But how empty, self-indulgent, and meaningless it seemed, sitting on the beach or beside a volcano, compared to the intense and rewarding time I had with my co-workers at the work site. Paradise, no matter how beautiful, is not a place, and can only be found in your heart, through meaningful interaction.

A few other things struck me during this trip.

In North America, time seems to move very quickly, days and weeks merging into the next as we go about our routines. But 10 days in Nicaragua felt like two months. The continuous assault on my senses, with nothing routine or predictable, seemed to slow everything right down. I felt like I was squeezing every last drop of life out of every day.

We spent a lot of time driving through the streets of Managua, to and from the worksite and other locations. If you think driving in Canada is bad, a few hours on these roads makes our drivers look like angels. I would hear the odd courtesy toot of the horn to let another driver or pedestrian know a driver was passing, but not once did I see or hear anyone honking in anger. Not once did I see a driver give anyone the finger.

I travelled thousands of kilometres to help a small community in need. But there are so many people in need everywhere, it's almost paralyzing as you think about where to start. But it also makes me wonder if I am doing enough for those who need help closer to home. The lesson for me is to do something, anything, to serve someone in need. Make a difference somewhere and become involved. Separation breeds indifference. Unity produces compassion.

While I was in Nicaragua, I felt hyper aware and in the moment. I have never felt so incredibly alive. I know I brought the best version of myself to the table, as well as openness, enthusiasm, and a willingness to serve and stretch way beyond my usual comfort zone. I know these experiences will fade, but I also realize how important it will be to somehow keep these lessons top of mind, to not simply slip back to life the way I knew it, and to remember the incredible power of people coming together for the common purpose of doing something positive.