

Trip benefits from different views

Nicaragua affects women in many ways

By Debbie Howlett
Of the Emerald

Emerald editor Debbie Howlett recently returned from an 11-day trip to Nicaragua. This is the second in a five part series.



A group of women sat near the Eastern Airlines' ticket counter in the Portland International Airport. The crackle of excitement, set against a backdrop of apprehension, trailed the group.

Relaying conflicting reports of a bombing at the Managua, Nicaragua airport only half-a-day earlier, the women contemplated the

days events.

"I heard it was from the north."

"The wires said it was from Costa Rica."

"My husband heard the same thing."

Secure in the carpeted confines of the Portland Airport terminal, a few of the women debated whether the trip was safe, and whether they felt comfortable going. But when Flight 453 left the airport runway, on its way to Miami with a connecting flight to Managua, all but one of the women were aboard.

State Sen. Margie Hendriksen, D-Eugene, changed plans at the last minute. Hendriksen, who because of an impending special legislative session was scheduled for a four day version of the trip, decided to insure her attendance at the special session.

"I don't think there's any assurance I can get back for the session," Hendriksen said. "I'm concerned about (the attack), but I'd go anyway, if we didn't have the session."

As Hendriksen watched from a terminal window, the 747 'Whisperliner' carried 15 women skyward, leaving a vapor trail of apprehension and excitement.

EVERY MAKE, EVERY MODEL

The 15 women (and two men) who made the trip combined to fill nearly every possible cadre of occupation and lifestyle. From a conservative realtor to a radical student, university professors to a corporate vice-president, farmers and nurses. These women's occupations defied any common link.

The women were brought together through the Eugene Council on Human Rights in Latin America as



Photo by Debbie Howlett

Gail Gill ponders the Nicaraguan flag — a flag that may represent a nation "becoming more and more like the middle east."

days in a country embroiled in war.

Each woman hoped to gain first-hand knowledge and insight of Central America, and to learn as much as possible about the situation in Nicaragua. Some women started the trip with set ideas. Others were reserving an opinion until after the trip.

But whether the women knew Nicaragua or not, each found a way to broaden their knowledge. The way of finding information was not always the same for the members of the group.

One of the biggest questions the women struggled with was truth, and who, if anyone, spoke the truth.

Again the diversity of the group showed through in the answers they found.

Some of the women took the Sandinistas at their word. Some of the women interpreted the Sandinista's as providing a constant stream of pro-Sandinista viewpoints as an attempt — through saturation — to blot out anything that wasn't flattering. And others tried to balance the pro-Sandinista comments with an equal amount of opposing comments from whatever source they could find — visiting journalists, taxi drivers, even well-to-do Nicaraguans.

THE SANDINISTA LINE

For Colette Craig, a University linguistics professor, the Sandinista philosophy isn't propaganda, it's the truth.

"They looked you straight in the eyes when they talked to you," Craig said. "You really got the feeling there was a new spirit in Nicaragua."

Calling the anti-Sandinista contras "murderers, idiots" Craig, a French citizen, was taken aback by a seemingly American inclination to accept the contras and refuse the Sandinistas.

"Some days it just irritates me, other days it depresses me."

"I went with the feeling the United States shouldn't support the contras," said Joan Acker, head of the University's new center for the study of women in society. "I was

very impressed (with the Sandinistas), their sincerity came through very clearly. They're concerned that we should understand them, but without being pushy or demanding.

"They have a dream and a hope for their own society, not on the model of the U.S.," Acker said.

The "gentleness" of the Nicaraguan people was one of the things that both Craig and Acker expressed surprise at.

"The small details of how people interacted" were subtle clues to the Nicaraguan's gentleness, Craig said.

THE UNITED STATES NON-LINE

Anthony Quantin, the U.S. Ambassador to Nicaragua looked strangely out of place in the crowded Managua airport. In the muggy Nicaraguan heat, Quantin's dark blue blazer and natty striped neck tie seemed to belong in another world. Standing in line at the customs counter with the group of women from Oregon, Quantin freely offered his opinions about Nicaragua and U.S. policies.

It was a very unlikely place to hear the U.S. "line." When asked for a short interview "on the record," Quantin declined saying that there were already too many spokespersons for Central American policy.

If the constant stream of Sandinista propaganda had cast doubt about the objectivity of the tour, the chance for U.S. response, and the hesitancy of Quantin, may only have served to make the Sandinista "line" more credible.

"I have a hard time believing there are saints in any government. It was fortunate to have a chance to talk with (Quantin) because it's a different perspective," said Gail Gill, who heads U.S. Rep. Jim Weaver's Eugene office. "He impressed me in a negative way. Pointed questions made him visibly uncomfortable."

Gill, whose special interest lies in international politics, was unconvinced that Quantin was more than a "yes" man for the Reagan Administration.

"It became apparent to me that he has no real power in determining policy," Gill said. "I would think the ambassador would have the ability to set the tone."

"You have to feel for the man," she added. "If I had to explain decisions I didn't agree with and thought were silly, I probably wouldn't do a good job either."

SPREADING THE WORD

The biggest question left for most of the women was one of "What do I do now?"

For a lot of the women it is all they can do to keep up with the requests from all over for slide shows, lectures, and media interviews. But some of the women were motivated beyond that.

"I'm pretty confident at some level we had some gut reactions," said Craig, who plans to lecture, make small group presentations and interact with people on a "one to one basis."

"I sometimes have been marginally active in the Democratic Party," Acker said, "I intend to become more involved, especially in this election year."

ASUO Pres. Mary Hotchkiss also was one of the ones motivated to get more than superficially involved.

"One to one interactions will never stop," Hotchkiss said. "It's one thing to speak theoretically, it's another to say I saw this and this and this, and this is what we can do."

But perhaps Acker said it best, for the women, and for others.

"A lot of us need to get off our butts and do something."



'They looked you straight in the eyes when they talked to you. You really got the feeling there was a new spirit in Nicaragua.'
— Colette Craig

guests of the Nicaraguan Department of the Exterior and AMNLAE, a Nicaraguan women's organization. AMNLAE extended an official invitation for a delegation of Oregon women to visit Nicaragua after two of the group's executive directors visited the Oregon Legislature in June.

The diversity of the group was intentional, said Pat Wasp, the trip's organizer and an assistant to the director of ECHRLA.

The council wanted to involve women from every background in order to form the most representative group possible, Wasp said.

Despite each woman's individuality, one common thread each woman shared was an interest in Nicaragua that was strong enough to motivate them to spend 11

Nicaraguan slide show presented

Members of the Oregon women's delegation that visited Nicaragua this month will speak and show slides today and Thursday in Room 214 of the EMU from noon to 1:30 p.m.

The information sessions are being organized by University professors Collette Craig, linguistics, and Joan Acker, sociology and women's studies.

The sessions will begin with a quick historical overview of Nicaragua, a portrait of the delegation and an itinerary of the trip itself, Craig says.

Then different women will speak to different topics within their respective areas of expertise. Craig will discuss the Sandinista ideology as a melding of Christianity and revolution, Acker will (on Thursday) discuss the participation of women in Sandinista society and government and Pam Woodell, a nurse at McKenzie-Willamette Memorial Hospital, will speak on health care.

Other possible topics include Nicaraguan civil defense, the Contras, the Nicaraguan economy, and North America's stake in Central America.

Additional members of the delegation include Eugene realtors Bonnie Baker and Jean Tate; Gail Gill, a legislative aide to Rep. Jim Weaver; Oregon Daily Emerald editor Debbie Howlett and Extension Service Representative Carol Culler of Oregon State University.

The delegation represents "diverse sectors of society," Craig says, so that each member can plug into diverse information networks. For instance, Bonnie Baker will be speaking to business groups like the rotary club, and Woodell will address a local nurse's association.

Also today, Acker talks at 12:30 p.m. on KLCC's "Blue Plate Special," and Sharon Posner will interview Gill and Tate on KEZI at 11:30 a.m.