

The waters of friendship

Nicaragua offers unexpected riches to those looking for something more than a winter vacation

BY ALICE HARDESTY
CONTRIBUTING WRITER

Marili and Dave Reilly didn't spend their winter vacation relaxing as they normally would. No, this year, they spent their winter vacation hauling cement blocks and buckets of water in the tiny rural town of Camoapa, Nicaragua.

They were part of a seven-member group of retired people from St. Michael & All Angels Episcopal Church in Northeast Portland. The youngest member was 58 and the oldest nearly 70, an impressive age range for urbanites unaccustomed to hard labor.

The group traveled under the auspices of El Porvenir, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to provide water and sanitation projects in poor communities where there is no such thing as plumbing. The Portland group was to

build 17 latrines over a period of seven work days. They worked in crews of two to three members, plus the Nicaraguan homeowner who sometimes helped, and a skilled cement mason provided by El Porvenir.

They rode to work each day in the back of a pick-up. On the way they passed women carrying large water jugs on their heads, alongside drainage ditches littered with plastic and paper, and yards inhabited by fat pigs and skinny dogs. Gillian Butler, one of the St. Michael's volunteers, described the barrio (neighborhood) where they worked in Camoapa as "not totally squalid, but primitive. Some of the houses had electricity, but there was no running water. And no toilets."

This was rural Nicaragua — and it was poor.

The work was hot, gritty and exhausting, but the volunteers fulfilled their mission. At the end, they felt they received more than they gave.

El Porvenir is Spanish for "the future." The organization, founded in 1990 and headquartered in Managua, also has an office in Denver. Their main purpose is to improve the standard of living for rural Nicaraguans. Volunteers work together with

local families to build community wash stations called lavanderías, dig wells, and build la-trines. Some groups also install fuel-efficient stoves and plant trees. The cost to volunteer is \$1,175 for a 10-day trip, which includes lodging and all meals, transportation within Nicaragua, health and travel insurance, a full-time translator, and cultural and recreational activities. The website, www.elporvenir.org, gives additional information, including the advisory: "Good health is required to participate."

El Porvenir took good care of the

Portland volunteers.

In-country staff members Rosi and Jimmy acted as interpreters, and José made sure they had fresh filtered water to drink and brush their teeth. His mom, Catalina, arranged tours and recreation, and inspected the kitchens for cleanliness.

Groups from Saint Michael & All Angels have been going to Nicaragua for 15 years. This year they stayed in a simple but comfortable new hotel, which replaced the more rustic lodging of previous years. Bruce Collins was making his third trip, Hjalmer Lofstrom his fourth, and Mary Lou Hennrich her fifth. For Mary Lou's husband David Still, Gillian Butler, and Marili and Dave Reilly, it was their first time in Nicaragua.

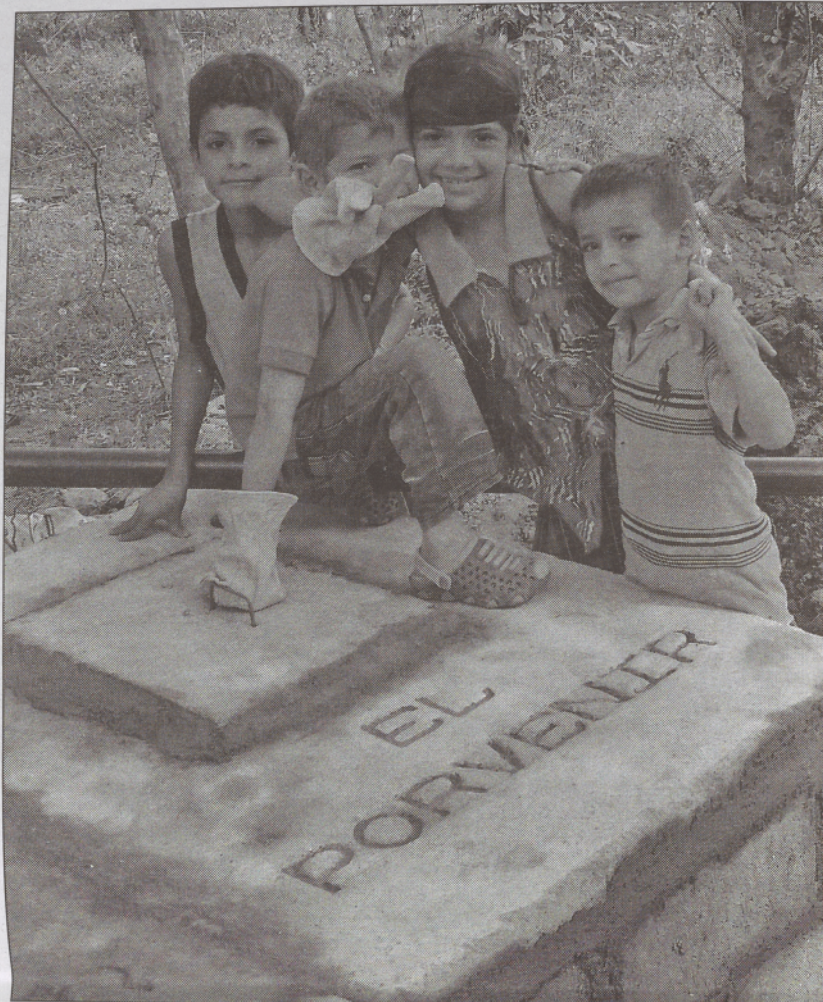
St. Michael's involvement began around 2000 when Marla McGarry-Lawrence, St. Michael's deacon at that time, was contacted by Carole Harper, one of the founders of El Porvenir. In a recent phone interview, Marla told me how she decided years ago that the best way to develop ties with her fellow Americans south of the border was not through conventional tourism but with a deeper involvement, by working side-by-side with the Nicaraguan people. El Porvenir was the answer.

"We're not the teachers," Marla said, "We're the learners. We're also their friends. We feel such gratitude for the people who open their homes and their lives

"The greatest challenge of the day is: how to bring about a revolution of the heart."



— Dorothy Day —



Children pose in front of their new latrine in Camoapa, Nicaragua.

PHOTO BY MARILI REILLY

to us, and we honor who they are with deep respect." In rural Nicaragua she realized the importance of clean water. "Dirty water kills," she observed. "Especially when mothers mix baby formula with water that isn't sterilized. The infants develop diarrhea, which is so hard to control."

Marla had been to Nicaragua five times when she and her husband, Gary, stopped going after his 2008 heart surgery.

"I saw what we were doing as very deeply connected to baptism," she said, "the cleansing of the water, water that restores us. This is how we can live out our baptismal promise of making the world a more just and equitable place."

Nicaragua is one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere, second only to Haiti. Nearly half the population lives below the international poverty line, which until recently was \$1.25 a day. The official unemployment rate is 7 percent, but 47 percent are considered underemployed. The situation is more desperate for the youth, where 40 percent are either unemployed or work in the "informal" sector.

The nation's economic development was stifled by decades of the brutally repressive Somoza regime, supported by the U.S. government. Then during the 17 years of the Sandinista revolution, the country

suffered a devastating earthquake that destroyed its industrial base in Managua.

The Sandinista revolution was finally victorious in 1979, but it was followed by 10 years of "Contra" wars. What was publicized in the U.S. as a civil war was really a return of Somoza's brutal National Guard, attacking the schools, clinics and land cooperatives newly established by the Sandinista government. The Contras were a military force funded by the U.S. and, after the funding was withdrawn, covertly supported by the C.I.A. As if this were not enough, Hurricane Mitch in 1998, the resulting floods and more earthquakes have added to the collective misery.

To this day the Nicaraguan people, though proud and stalwart, are still very poor.

On her first El Porvenir trip in 2001, Marla's group went to Matagalpa to visit the grave of one of Nicaragua's most beloved heroes, Ben Linder. As a young, idealistic engineer from Portland, Linder had moved to Nicaragua in 1983 to create small hydroelectric systems for impoverished rural communities.

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The Revolutions of the Heart series originates from a workshop taught by Martha Gies, whose students are profiling people in the community who inspire us. The title comes from Dorothy Day: "The greatest challenge of the day is: how to bring about a revolution of the heart, a revolution which has to start with each one of us." (Leaves and Fishes: The Inspiring Story of the Catholic Worker Movement.)