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Delightfully eccentric, he doubled as a clown and a unicyclist, enchanting the children and permanently imprinting himself on the hearts of the Nicaraguan people. In 1987, while peacefully "turning water into light" in a remote village, Linder became the first American citizen to be killed by the U.S.-funded Contras.

The 2016 St. Michael's team was drawn to Nicaragua for several reasons. Gillian Butler had been aware of the struggles of Central Americans during the 1970s and 1980s. "I remember the (Sandinista) Revolution, and how excited all of us were on the left," she said. "And then I was appalled that the U.S. was supporting dictators and death squads." Gillian was a member of the Portland Central American Solidarity Committee (PCASC). She marched in protest of U.S. policies, and her car wore a bumper sticker that read: El Salvador Is Spanish for Vietnam.

Marili and Dave Reilly, being recently retired, wanted to do something worthwhile for those not as fortunate. "Clean water should be available to everyone as a human right," Dave told me.

On his previous trips to Nicaragua, Hjalmer Lofstrom had observed that in rural areas, women and children relied on creeks and river water for drinking, cooking and washing clothes. Because hauling water would take a significant portion of their daylight hours, the children would be taken out of school to help. But after El Porvenir had been to the village, things were different.

"As we returned to former village projects we learned there had been a significant reduction in children being ill," Hjalmer told me. "With a closer clean water source and improved sanitation the women have more time to give to their families. They're now finding the time to add to their family income by making and selling their handcrafted wares. Some of the young women who dropped out of school are now returning and graduating."

In this way, these clean water projects can lead to economic stability.

A project begins when a rural community identifies a need and makes its proposal to El Porvenir. Sanitation projects usually precede wells and lavanderías to make sure that the water will not become contaminated. In the case of the Camoapa barrio, the home owners were required to provide the tools and to dig a hole in their backyard 4 x 6 x 8 ft. deep. Seventeen holes awaited the St. Michael's group, who carried cement blocks weighing from 30 to 70 pounds to each hole. Then the volunteers set about mixing sand, water and cement powder into a grout. A team of professional masons hired by El Porvenir worked down in the holes, receiving the cement blocks and the buckets of grout, and forming the walls of the latrines. The latrines consisted of two vaults: one would be used for 10 years while being treated with lime, at which point it would be capped and the other used for the next ten years. By that time the first vault would be safe to use again.

The construction process was challenging for the St. Michael's group. Tools were always in short supply, often broken, and inadequate by

U.S. standards. According to Dave Reilly, "We're used to working around good equipment and technology. This was manual labor. It was frustrating at times because this is not the way we do it."

"El Porvenir's focus is on making the water clean. It's not a tool provision organization," he said with a smile. And the volunteers come to villages like Camoapa to work alongside local people, doing things the way they do them, not to bring in bulldozers and loaders to do everything for them.

In between the labor were other rewards, including hearing from Aynn Setright, her history and politics.

Setright had first gone to Nicaragua with Witness for Peace in 1985. She spent two years driving an ambulance, picking up wounded from either side, both Contras and Sandanistas, as well as people with ruptured appendixes and victims of farm accidents. She ended up falling in love with the Nicaraguans, one in particular, and now lives in Managua with her husband and adult children.

The Nicaraguans seemed to reciprocate the love of these hard-working gringos. The group was interviewed on local TV three times by two very serious newscasters. Local children, who were on a school holiday at the time, also enjoyed the St. Michael's group. While the adults were mixing cement and hauling the huge blocks, the kids "helped" by sifting sand and jumping off the piles of dirt. At the end of the visit the volunteers returned to the barrio where El Porvenir had arranged a piñata party. All the homeowners, neighbors and kids were there. The North Americans handed out bags of candy to the children, and the homeowners gave their guests little multicolored straw fans as mementoes. This time everybody got to play.

You might ask why anyone would want to go to a poor, hot, mosquito-infested Central American country and haul cement blocks, especially if they have already reached the age when they can take life easy. This adventure certainly isn't for everyone. But working together with people from another culture offers unique opportunities. It involves learning to work their way rather than ours and letting go of the American obsessions. This kind of opportunity can go a long way toward opening a person's eyes and heart. It also allows U.S. citizens the chance to make a gesture of apology for the suffering our nation caused the Nicaraguan people over so many decades. In the Episcopal worship service we sometimes confess not only the evil we have done but "the evil done on our behalf."

Except for the occasional controversy about possible privatization of its water system, Portland residents continue to enjoy the pristine, unfiltered water from the federally owned Bull Run Watershed. Clean water certainly is one of the most important public health accomplishments in the Western world, yet it's a blessing many of us hardly even notice.

After four trips with El Porvenir, Hjalmer Lofstrom has many memories and enduring relationships with families in Nicaragua.

"When I turn on my shower or open the tap for a drink of water I am reminded of their needs," he said. "But also I'm reminded of those villagers whose lives have been permanently changed by something so simple as people giving to people."

Requiem for Steven

by Walt Curtis

I like to believe
you rode the wave out -
The redemption of Easter and Springtime.
The blossoming trees have become you!
Steven, you wanted a new life, you were brave enough to exit this
painfully unbearable one.
I am proud of you!
To make the decision to end suffering with no place to go.
Homeless, fighting heroin addiction. Methadone and food stamps your
solace.

I thought you'd make it!
The .22 rifle across your feet.
How did the weapon end up like that?!
Yet you looked peaceful. Released. Free at last!
I am stunned. Myself and Markus tried hard for months -
to give you friendship and self-esteem
We were wrong! It isn't that easy at age 51 to escape physical, sexual,
mental and drug abuse.

Nowhere to go except to the noose in the ceiling and the step ladder.
Stepdad a military abuser! Raping the kids. The bastard.
We found you on the kitchen floor. Gunshot in the mouth.
Eyes wide-open.

A new cosmic beginning! Strange to contemplate and say.
Every day I pray for your soul to be at peace.
I thought you'd make it! Have a future. I was wrong!
I thought you'd beat family abuse, meth, and heroin addiction.
The homeless have nowhere to go.

It was destined to happen after 50 years of pain, abuse.
Brutal stepfather whipping your ass daily, stealing paper route money.
What an SOB!
Steve, you were only an innocent kid. Now you are in Paradise.
I know your rebirth and cosmic relief.

I touched you on the shoulder not disturbing anything.
Before the police came to examine the suicide scene.
Possibly a "crime scene" - I gave Markus a hug and said we must
nurture your soul
and talk to you to bring you rest. Namaste!
I was thinking: "A dead person has nothing to say. The body is a
statement in itself."
We then call 911, the police.

Steven, your being is born again in Springtime. You rode the wave.
Flowering trees, daffodils in the breeze - are a new you.

At every Eastertide, I'll recall the shocking and spiritual exit
you made from this place.
Steven, you've shaken and seared my soul till the day I die.
I am not whole with so much personal and social horror
Neither were you. Namaste. Peace.

This poem is a public obituary for Steven A White, who committed suicide in early March. His life and death epitomize the plight of everyone on the street.



Dignity



Poverty