

# Oregon teacher joins Nicaraguan education drive

by Millie Thayer

[Ed. note: Millie Thayer teaches Spanish at Grant High School in Portland. She recently returned from a month in Nicaragua.]

**SAN MARTINO, NICARAGUA**—(a fictitious name, used to protect the safety of the article's subjects)—It's a long way from this muddy village in the mountains of Nicaragua to the cozy Southeast Portland bungalow where Sheryl lived until four years ago. Now her day begins at 5:30 when she is awakened by roosters and light coming through the large cracks between planks in the storeroom where she sleeps. Breakfast is coffee and corn cereal made over a kerosene stove. A cistern outside provides water for washing up.

Sheryl's present job bears only slight resemblance to her former position in Canby High School's Title I reading and math program teaching teenagers with learning problems. Now she works with semi-literate peasants in Nicaragua's Adult Education program.

By 7:30 on a typical day, Sheryl's Nicaraguan co-workers have tumbled into the office and the air is full of jokes tossed back and forth. She keeps up with the rest, frequently sending them into fits of laughter with her straight-faced humor. They are mostly young people in their early twenties, playful and spirited, but with a deep seriousness.

Their 'office' is actually a brick and wood shack with a tin roof, four rooms, a dirt floor and no windows. Some rough wooden tables serve as desks and a few ancient typewriters lie scattered about. A handmade poster declares: "Every man upon coming to the earth has a right to be educated and afterward to contribute to the education of others." A pistol sits on a table for ready use, a reminder of the recent attacks by counterrevolutionaries on villages in the area.

Why did Sheryl give up her comfortable existence to plunge into such an unfamiliar, difficult and dangerous situation? Frustration and a desire to feel that her efforts made a difference were at the root of her move.

Back in Portland, Sheryl had worked with educational misfits in a series of programs which never seemed able to meet their needs. She became concerned with the larger social problems—dead-end jobs, fragmented communities—which she saw as the source of her students' difficulties. Impatient with inadequate efforts to confront these problems, she sought a society where she could make a contribution to bettering people's lives in a concrete way. In Nicaragua, she felt that the social and economic changes being made and the new government's commitment to education would make this possible.

Sheryl came to Nicaragua in August of 1979, six weeks after the overthrow of Anastasio Somoza, the U.S.-backed former dictator. On a recent trip I visited her village in the coffee-growing region.

Sheryl has a wry sense of humor, an infectious chuckle and a tendency to mutter thoughts aloud. Being in the spotlight horrifies her, and it was only with great difficulty and large quantities of imported chocolate that I convinced her to give me an interview.

Over her ironing one day she described the mood in Nicaragua after Somoza's defeat.

"You crossed the border and there was this incredible air of euphoria. It was like a fiesta all over the country."

In the first seven months, she travelled, picked coffee, gave classes to the children of workers on an hacienda and taught women in a poor barrio to read and write. In March of 1980 she joined the Literacy Crusade, a nationwide campaign aimed at eradicating the 50 percent illiteracy rate.

"When people are illiterate, they feel powerless. The Sandinistas are trying to build a society based on mass participation, so...they have to overcome this sense of impotence. Teaching people to read was a way to reach out to everyone in the country and make a real impact on their lives."

Sheryl became a supervisor of the high school-aged teachers who had volunteered to work in the campaign.

"I had twenty young 'brigadistas' under my control at one point..." Sheryl paused and smiled ruefully. "No, I won't say that. They had me



A Nicaraguan peasant child waits outside while her father attends an adult education class. (Photo: Millie Thayer)

under their control."

Her official title, "Technical Advisor," implied observing classes, giving advice and running workshops. But, in her words, she became "everything from mama to nurse to teacher to disciplinarian."

Problems? Materials didn't arrive; there weren't enough brigadistas; they would get sick or want to go home; many of the campesino students lived in remote areas inaccessible during the rainy season. Worst of all, there were deaths in some regions as counterrevolutionaries—"contras"—singled out literacy teachers as targets.

**"Teaching people to read makes a real impact on their lives."**

Yet, they succeeded. Sheryl proudly showed me the banner her region was awarded: "Territory Victorious Over Illiteracy." Nationally the campaign raised the percentage of the population able to read and write from 50 percent to 87 percent in only five months. Peasants developed a new ability to understand and affect their social environment. City kids learned about the lives of most of their country's people. What they saw deepened their commitment to making changes in Nicaragua that helped everyone.

"It was an extraordinary event. Being part of a literacy crusade has all the wonder of a mass movement, all the excitement of a war, but none of the blood, none of the sadness. I feel very lucky to have been part of it." (Sheryl has written a book about her experiences during this time, *And Also Teach Them to Read*, which is being published by Lawrence Hill.)

After the crusade, the brigadistas went back home to high school. But basic literacy was seen by the Sandinista government as only a first step. The problem became how to continue the process of adult education and where to find the teachers. The solution: those who knew a little would teach those who knew less. When the brigadistas left they selected their most advanced student or a person in the community with interest and education to become the new teacher. These 'coordinators,' as they were called, would take on the classes of adults and help them progress through the different levels of primary education. Meanwhile the teachers would continue to receive training.

After a year's stint teaching English in a high school, Sheryl once again began her work with adults in the summer of 1982. She became an Adult Education technician in a village, helping to supervise and assist the work of the coordinators in the

surrounding rural areas. This is where I found her.

It's pouring rain as we set off on foot to visit classes and consult with the peasant coordinators in Sheryl's zone. A landscape of gentle green mountains blurs and the dirt turns to mud beneath our feet. Lack of vehicles makes walking a necessity. Luckily we are soon picked up by a truck heading north carrying sacks of grain and several other people carrying a woman and baby.

At a junction we hop off and start walking again. Our path winds through haciendas; shiny-leaved coffee plants stretch off on either side under tall trees. Once we have to clamber off the road to let a herd of cattle pass; later two men on horseback ride by looking for them.

We first stop amongst the white wooden shacks of state hacienda workers where the coordinator is having some problems getting his class organized. Sheryl says the problems in her zone range from poor attendance because of long working hours to "so and so says his wife can't come to class because the coordinator is flirting with her." Sheryl often must go house to house talking with students to find out why they are not attending. In this case the problem is more simple—a shortage of materials—and easily solved.

All these interactions begin with an exchange of greetings and some conversation about the coordinator's family, what's new in the community and the latest rumors of contra activity. It's considered rude to get right to the point. I marvel at how comfortable Sheryl seems. In Portland she never much enjoyed social situations. Here she relates easily with people, remembers all of their many family members, their ailments and accomplishments.

The problem settled, it's time to move on so that I can see one of the classes. Someone has warned us not to continue farther into Sheryl's zone because it is getting late. There have been contra attacks recently and the area is patrolled by local militias at night. Unidentified travelers run a risk of being mistaken for the enemy and fired upon. We decide to turn back and visit a class being taught in another zone.

Rickety steps lead up to the door of a one-room schoolhouse on stilts. Inside, the light is dim, coming only from a few window openings. At the far end of the room are five or six rows of wooden benches, each with a shelf on the back for the row behind to write on.

At the blackboard stands a young man of perhaps eighteen with longish hair, a cap, jeans, and a purple T-shirt. He has eleven students—eight adults, three children—sitting with books open in front of them. They have come to class after a long day at work and are still in their muddy work boots and stained clothes. The students glance timidly at us as we sit in back. The teacher

has them read syllables from the blackboard, helps them individually as they practice writing and gives a dictation on the national literacy crusade.

These work-worn men hunched over desks made for children, their earnest faces as they clutch pencils and struggle to write, their young teacher's gentle efforts to help them: the scene has me close to tears. Here, in this remote corner of Nicaragua, I begin to see some of the reasons why this revolution is so important to its people, why so many have been willing to give their lives for the opportunities it has opened.

Afterwards, Sheryl's coworker evaluates the class with the coordinator, encouraging and suggesting improvements: "Your dictation was good, but try to start some discussion among the students about the photographs in each lesson. Get them talking about their experiences. Reading and writing need to be tied to real life, not just come out of books."

Ordinarily, Sheryl's trips into her zone last two or three days with up to six hours of walking each day. The teachers willingly offer her food and lodging in return for her attention and support. But today we retrace our steps to the village so that I can catch a truck back to the city.

On the way home, Sheryl talks about the coordinators with whom she works. Each receives about seven dollars a month. They are essentially volunteers who do their regular work in the fields, then lead evening classes and attend workshops on weekends.

"It's a work of great love done by people who are in the true sense of the word revolutionaries, who want a better life for themselves and their children, who want to help their neighbors. They are people who love to study and will share the little they've somehow managed to learn with someone else."

For this dedication the coordinators of popular education have become targets of counterrevolutionaries, many of them ex-National Guardsmen who cross into Nicaragua from Honduras and Costa Rica. At

last count 44 adult education teachers had been assassinated by the contras. Over fifty have been kidnapped and forced to help carry supplies. Others die because, as community leaders, they are also the first to join local militia units.

Recently, while Sheryl was attending a village celebration of the anniversary of the literacy campaign, a truck drove up with a coffin in the back. Everyone crowded around as villagers unloaded it onto the ground. When opened, the coffin revealed the body of Don Rosario, a peasant teacher who died fighting a band of contras. He had enlisted in the militia only a few weeks before.

I asked Sheryl why teachers are singled out for attack.

"The big landowners who back the contras are use to running the show. But education increases people's ability to be critical and gives them confidence to stand up for themselves. The work the teachers do builds support for the revolution. All this obviously threatens the upper classes."

Many of Sheryl's colleagues carry arms for self-defense as they walk through their rural zones. Sheryl doesn't, but she knows the danger and has faced the fact that she could be killed for her commitment.

Looking back on her life in Portland, what differences does Sheryl see?

"In Canby, the kids I worked with didn't care about school. And why should they? For them, with or without a high school diploma, life looked pretty bleak—crummy jobs or going into the army. They saw no hope for themselves or for the future."

"Now I work with people who have this incredible desire to learn, who are teaching and trying to advance themselves. Adult education in Nicaragua is taught by and for people who have hope for the first time."

Sheryl plans to stay in Nicaragua, much as she misses good friends and chocolate. What keeps her working under difficult conditions besides the motivation of her student-teachers?

"In the States the feeling you get is that you're a useless lump on society and you're lucky if you're allowed to do a job so that you can take home a paycheck."

"I think the most important thing that people have in Nicaragua that people don't have in the United States is a sense that your work is good and important, that you are good and important. People can see that they're helping to create a new and better society. And that's what keeps me here. For that, I could survive for a long time on beans and rice."

**Postscript:**

Attacks by the U.S.-supplied and trained contras have intensified in recent weeks. Following is an excerpt from a letter Sheryl wrote to a friend, describing an attack on the town of Pantasma on October 18th.

"...And now we get the news of 32 massacred in Pantasma, a town just across a few dozen mountains. [Later reports said 47 were killed.]

They burned everything in it, T., and the education office with people in it, the cooperative. I am seeing the faces of these dead people now and trying to get news of a beautiful

Gautemalan exile who works with adult education there. The names haven't come out yet. Now the lights are off in town again five nights in six and no gas for the lanterns. Bought up the last six candles yesterday. And we do have a full moon. I am shaken a bit by these things, T., and so I pick up this letter again at 1 p.m. in the bright sun. Yes, they died, all of them, and 300 contras burned the town. It makes it hard to sit and do what we are supposed to do...and the dead...we spent the last workshop playing around together...beautiful black eyes and the rest who I know from the same but can't remember as clearly... Things are about to get real ugly here, T. The (and here I have no word bad enough) who run the country you live in I think have decided to send everything to stomp this little anthill and who knows what they'll do when they can't."

## Street Beat

by Lanita Duke and Richard Brown

Baby Jane Doe's case was settled and the federal government lost. The **Street Beat** team asked, "Are there times when the federal government should interfere in the medical decisions of a family?"



**Clark Owens**  
Electrician

No, I don't think they should. Those medical decisions are a family matter and should stay within the family.



**Cynthia Coleman**  
Bellringer

Yes. Sometimes the parents may not have sense enough to know the depth of an illness.



**John H. Jackson**  
Salesman & Preacher

Yes and no. If it's a problem that the family can't see, if it's detrimental then the government should intercede. But if it's a family decision then the government should stay out.



**Raymond Hatton**  
Lineman

No! The family is like a unit. It's like a government. The family knows what's best for all.



**Dee Poff**  
Housewife

Well, that depends on the medical problem of the family. If it's a life or death situation, the government should.



**Bob Haugen**  
Cashier

I don't think so. It is a family matter. If someone wants to die because of an illness then the government should stay out. But if they want help—the government should help.