

THE CONNACHT TRIBUNE

# LIFESTYLE

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# Working as overseas volunteer puts our crisis in perspective

Tribune journalist **CIARAN TIERNEY** writes of enriching time working with Nicaragua's poor

BY CIARAN TIERNEY

**N**OT many people return home for Christmas with a heavy heart, but so rewarding was the experience of volunteering in Nicaragua over the previous three months that my feelings were mixed as I made the long journey back to Galway last month.

Volunteering in the Central American country, the final third of a wonderful gap year, proved to be one of the highlights of my life. It was amazing how the part of a career break which I had feared the most turned out to be the most rewarding.

Having become a professional scuba diver in Thailand and improved my grasp of Spanish in the Basque Country, I felt it was time to give something back in the final third of the year. But I had read so much about crime and poverty in Central America that I almost considered cancelling the final part of my global adventure. What a mistake that would have been!

For over three months, I based myself in the beautiful old colonial city of Granada, helping out with a small organisation, La Esperanza Granada, which helps with the provision of education in eight rural communities.

Shocked at first by the living conditions of these desperately poor people, many of whom live in primitive tin huts despite daily temperatures of over 30 degrees, I joined a team of between 30 and 35 volunteers from all over the world who were humbled by the welcome of the locals.

There was one other Irish volunteer, a teacher in her 30s from Wexford, and the city even had an Irish pub called O'Shea's, owned by Tommie Griffin from Dublin. Tommie (74) had moved home after a lifetime in the US, but couldn't settle, which is why he opted to open up a pub in Nicaragua, of all places, three years ago.

'La Esperanza' means 'Hope' in English and Nicaragua is a country which is crying out for hope. In all of the Americas only Haiti, which suffered a devastating earthquake and a cholera outbreak in 2010, is poorer.

Ravaged by years of war and economic stagnation, it was strange to be in such a deprived (but spiritually rich) place while there was so much talk of a 'crisis' back home. In Nicaragua, virtually nobody can afford to buy a car and it's not unusual to see an entire family of five or six on a bicycle. People still use donkeys and carts, there are few employment opportunities and much emigration, and yet people seem happy.

While our volunteer teams went out to the schools to provide one-on-one tuition, computing and English classes, and sporting opportunities to underprivileged children, the children and their families also taught us a lot about the value of community spirit and making the most of life. Even though they relish the chance to use a simple computer for 40 minutes once a week, Nicaraguan children love to get out and play. They make footballs from wrapped-up plastic bags and baseball bats out of trees. There are no such things as 'strangers' in Nicaraguan culture, so parents never worry about allowing the children to play outside. On crowded buses or in taxis, children are passed around from person to person so that they can find a seat. People chat to each other all the time.

Reggaeton and salsa music blasts out of huge sound systems on the buses, as Nicaraguans associate silence with sadness. So weekends away to the volcanic island of Ometepe, the Pacific resort of San Juan Del Sur, or the revolutionary city of Leon became music-filled adventures on the roads.



Connacht Tribune journalist Ciaran Tierney with one of the local staff, Belkys, during his three months as a volunteer in Nicaragua. 20-year old single mum Belkys works for La Esperanza in return for being sponsored to attend University at weekends.



Nicaraguan staff look on as one of the children enjoys the first ever Skype link between her school and students in the USA last month.



Volunteers working with children in a Nicaraguan school.

Only 30% of Nicaraguan children complete primary school and teenage pregnancies are a huge issue in the country, which is why La Esperanza Granada concentrates on assisting with education at a very basic level.

The organisation sponsors 90 children through secondary school. A further 11 'ayudantes' (or helpers) work full-time for La Esperanza for US\$80 (about €60) per month while being sponsored through University at weekends.

My job involved making videos of the volunteers at work, organising the weekly volunteer meetings, and bringing computers out to the schools where the joy of the youngsters was overwhelming. Early on, I learned the value of acceptance and patience when an attempted Skype link-up with an American school failed. The children, so full of expectation earlier, just shrugged their shoulders and got on with things. In the Third World, things which we take for granted here in Ireland, don't always work out.

For six weeks, at the same time every week, we tried to get the connection going until, almost magically, it all

worked out. Finally, the little seven and eight year olds got a chance to share information with youngsters in St. Louis. They took such joy out of sharing their names, favourite colours, food, or animals with the children in America. I would have given up, but one of the more experienced volunteers taught me the importance of quiet determination.

**There are no such things as 'strangers' in Nicaraguan culture, so parents never worry about allowing the children to play outside.**

Week after week, she tried to get the connection up and running. The joy on the faces of the children was infectious. It made the long wait worthwhile.

Some classes contained up to 60 children and most of our volunteers were assigned to work with four or five who were identified as needing a little extra help each day. It was remarkable to

watch how the bonds grew between the youngsters and the volunteers, who were mainly from Europe and North America.

In Nicaraguan schools, there is very little competition between the students. The brightest two or three answer for everyone and it does not take long for the weaker pupils to be left behind. Volunteers are required to have intermediate Spanish and to give a two month commitment so that they build up a relationship with the children.

The volunteers gave the children, many from large or single parent families, the personal attention they craved and the parents provided unbelievable welcome when we visited their houses for afternoon homework clubs. They might have had very little, but they were generous to a fault at times.

For the children, the 'ayudantes' were wonderful role models. They work in their local primary schools, liaising with the teachers, assisting the foreign volunteers and, most importantly of all, showing the children that there is no limit to what they may achieve.

They brought home the true value of education, something I had always taken for granted, to me. To see how these 20-year olds only wanted to become teachers, to help the children in their own deprived neighbourhoods, and also to see the light of recognition in the children's eyes when they learned something new was so rewarding.

I could not get over how much fun there was in the La Esperanza office and how much hope these impoverished youngsters had for the future. Hardly any children from their communities had ever attended University before. Their optimism seemed to be in marked contrast to the despair back in Ireland whenever I checked the news from home during the IMF 'bailout' in November. That even made headlines in Central America!

It was humbling to note how much pleasure the young staff took from a simple meal out in Tip-Top, the Nicaraguan equivalent of Supermac's, in my last week. For these young people, eating out is a rare luxury which they might get to enjoy just once a year.

Living in the city for three months was a great way of improving my Spanish, as I was even able to take private lessons for US \$3 per hour.

It was also a great way of making friends with people from all over the world, including Germany, Spain, France, the USA, and the UK. There was an incredible range of ages and nationalities among my colleagues, from fresh-faced 18-year olds starting out in life to retired teachers in their 60s who brought huge expertise to the schools.

We socialised together on La Calzada, the city's beautiful pedestrianised street, and organised trips away at weekends. In late November, there were a lot of emotional farewells at the end of the Nicaraguan school year.

Living in Nicaragua taught me that there is great joy in helping others and that the poorest people on the planet deserve to have some hope. The locals reminded me of the importance of community and friendship, the extended family, relaxing, and how to have fun with very little. Lessons to be treasured in these troubled times.