

Summer in Nicaragua

By Megan Barolet-Fogarty '04

In a World Cup year, Guilford women's soccer players volunteer internationally

For six weeks this summer, Heather Ruggiero '06 and I volunteered with ProNica, a Quaker organization in Achuapa, Nicaragua. ProNica supports a growing cooperative in Achuapa that was formed in the early 1990s, a time when many cooperatives all over Nicaragua were collapsing under government pressure. Amazingly, this cooperative has flourished. The cooperative works with the local farmers and experiments with new growing methods on their model farm, but they also have health projects with filtered water and a natural medicine clinic, as well as a socio-cultural department that organizes cultural gatherings and festivals.

Achuapa is a remarkable little town. Far from perfect, it has developed and maintained a spirit of hope that often seems lost in the desperate poverty of Nicaragua. I was told by the townspeople, and I believed them, that no one went hungry in Achuapa. There was plenty of visible poverty, people have very little, but they share what they have, and always make sure that everyone has something. Heather and I were received into this community with so much love and acceptance that it brings tears to my eyes now. How ironic that we in America are so hostile and cold to foreigners new to our country. Nicaraguans would never think of such a thing. Guests are given the best beds, the best food and made to feel at home. I can't help but feel that we Americans could stand to learn a thing or two about hospitality.

While in Achuapa, Heather and I fought a losing battle to repay the kindness of the Nicaraguan people by devoting ourselves to work in the local library, and organizing a women's soccer team. The small municipal library is another project sponsored by ProNica, and in the somewhat drab rooms, (with no lights) we found beautifully illustrated children's books donated by Friends in the U.S. With the help of the librarian's daughter,



Barolet-Fogarty, far left, and Ruggiero, center, traveled to Achuapa, Nicaragua, in May to volunteer with ProNica, a Quaker organization. They started a girls' soccer team with players ages 11 to 17, and supplied the team with used Guilford uniforms and equipment.

Erica, and a group of volunteers from Sarah Lawrence College, we organized and cleaned, and we painted large murals on the walls of the library. We also held an arts camp, and each day we would have a different activity, from making construction paper hearts to weaving string bracelets. We brought the supplies for these activities from the States, and they were well used by the often more than 60 kids.

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Our other major project was the development of a women's soccer team. Heather and I both play for the Guilford women's team, and we were very excited to be bringing down our used, but still very nice uniforms donated by our coaches, Eric Lewis and Mike Lynch. Many of my teammates went above and beyond by sending their shorts, socks and even cleats to others who would use them more. Along with some Nicaraguan friends, we organized a girls' team to compete against the women. Because we brought both home and away jerseys, we had enough uniforms for everyone, and the Achuapa Women's Soccer League was born.

There are so many other stories that

could be told; exciting things like Heather's work with a disabled woman who wanted to learn how to embroider in order to support herself from her wheelchair – a difficult thing in rural Nicaragua. When Heather traveled to this woman's community she had to ford two rivers on foot. For the final trip, the last week before we left, I walked with Heather to help carry our clothes that we wanted to leave behind in this more desperate area of

Achuapa. A month into the rainy season, the first river was above our waists, and we held onto each other to wade across. An hour down the

road, everyone we encountered warned us that crossing the last river on foot was impossible, but we decided to continue and see if we could at least send our bags across. When we arrived, the river was up to neck-height on a grown man, but we were invited to cross on two horses, and even the horses struggled to swim across the river. It was quite an adventure, but we delivered the clothes!

The six weeks in Nicaragua were among the best of my life. Although I find it hard to describe my experience as “serving” the Nicaraguan people, because they obviously did far more for me than I did for them, I do believe that both sides benefited from the solidarity and love that was shared between us.