Agricultural Programs in Nicaragua

In late February of 2011 I made my way to Nicaragua to spend five weeks working on organic gardening and farming initiative. My connection was my aunt, who is part of Saint William Catholic Church in Louisville, Kentucky. The parish has a very active partnership with a parish in the small town of Esquipulas, located in the southern part of the Matagalpa district. I learned a great deal about Nicaragua, the local slang and customs, and added some agricultural techniques to my list of skills. But more than anything else, I gained an appreciation for a way of life that is sometimes very different from what we call normal here in “Gringolandia.”

While there are many churches and organizations providing aid in Nicaragua, St. William focuses its efforts on child nutrition and sustainable agriculture. I worked with the three coordinators who implement and monitor agricultural programs for some 70 women and two-dozen men. They are university educated with degrees in agronomy, horticulture and environmental sciences. Together, the coordinators provide training in every step from planting to harvest, and provide seeds and tools as well. The two separate programs are split by gender. Women are taught to garden, allowing them to stay close to home and take care of their kids, and men are taught more large-scale production, in hopes that they can cultivate enough to sell at the market. Nicaraguans in the countryside usually eat rice, beans and tortillas for three meals a day. The women’s gardens are meant to improve childhood nutrition by diversifying their diet to include more fresh vegetables. To monitor growth, the directors also weigh and measure the height of children from...
age 0 to 5 years. The larger scale side of the program (with the men) deals with plots that are much larger and are often situated high in the valleys and hills where land is cheaper. Coordinators visit as often as possible to react to fungal and pest problems. I became a provisional coordinator for daily trips.

The basic structure of the partnership is financial support provided by St. William's members and accompanying visits by delegations and committees. Every few months, a half dozen members of the parish travel to Nicaragua and tour the projects, meet the people they support, and pitch in when they can. Most often, those who arrive to visit are well past college age and are typically not Spanish speakers. With my background in Spanish and age, I was a very different kind of visitor. The fact that I could speak directly with the members of the community meant that I was able to really connect with the people I met. I was also not part of a delegation, so there was never a point where I retreated to the shelter of English conversation. Being there as an individual and not part of a delegation made my experience very personal and my vulnerability made for much more honest and deep dialogue.

I spent part of my time living with host families in the small towns surrounding Esquipulas, often with populations under 500. I had seen Latin American rural poverty, but had not been as surrounded by it as I was during these stays. My presence was not completely novel, but living there day to day, eating what my hosts ate and taking part in the daily lifeways of my hosts (now, friends) was an experience in solidarity. I had amazing conversations with elders in the community and got a sense of the history and politics of the nation through their
experiences and opinions. I got an idea of how they feel about the US and they got to ask me directly what I thought about life in Nicaragua. I got up every day and spent the day in their world, truly immersed. It was hard at times, but the longer I was there the more comfortable I was communicating and introducing myself.

My trip would not have been financially possible without the grant I received from the LACIS Program at UW-Madison. I am deeply grateful for the support. I am still getting phone calls and sending emails with the people I spent time with and hope to return someday.