

Olympia/Santo Tomás Update

US/Nicaragua Solidarity—Since 1989

Fall 2015

An update
from the
Thurston–Santo Tomás
Sister County
Association

A Lincoln Elementary Student and his Grandpa in Santo Tomás

By Russell Fox and John Paul Fox-Seidel

Forty-seven years ago as a Peace Corps volunteer in Chile I (Russ) had my first experience living with a family where no one spoke English, where toilets were outside, and where cross-cultural hospitality was genuine and humbling. It's hard to adequately express how wonderful it was to share a similar experience with John Paul, my eight-year old grandson who is just starting third grade at Lincoln Elementary.

We were the first Thurston County Delegation members

hosted by our Santo Tomás family, although Doña Manuela López was one of the original members—along with Doña Aurora Baez—of the sewing cooperative twenty-five years ago. Manuela's grand-daughter, Nereyda Jarquín, along with her husband, daughter, sister, brothers, mother, father, cousins, aunts and uncles (we seemed to meet more every day!) welcomed us into their family for two weeks.

John Paul dictated journal entries every evening, and here are some of his reflections about arriving and meeting our family:

“...we finally arrived and met our families. We and our suitcases rode through the town in the back of a truck. The children in the family were excited to show me around. They have three dogs, two pigs, a grumpy parrot and two friendly parakeets. We played soccer in the street in front of the house. The dinner was yummy. Chicken, rice, vegetables and a chilled Quaker Oats drink.

The next morning we woke up to the parrot's screaming the girls' names a few minutes after they left for

school about 7am. The parrot was on the wall just above my bed!

Breakfast (and all the meals) have been very good. We had gallo pinto, tortillas and passion fruit juice for breakfast....This is a great house, and the kids are very kind to me.”



John Paul and Russ overlooking Santo Tomás

From my perspective, we could not have had a more appropriate family to host an 8-year old with a 70-year grandfather who speaks Spanish. The two girls in the family, 7-year old Lismary and 8-year old Aña, attend Rubén Darío school which is just across the street from their house. Nereyda's 13-year old brother, Yewdring, lives with them and is part of the core team of children that welcomed John Paul. The three of them, along with an increasing number of other neighborhood children, spent every available hour playing with John Paul in the street or on the school playground. Mia and Aspen, the two other pre-teenage children in our delegation, often joined too.

While families with children had been part of previous years' delegations, this was the year of inter-generational diversity. We ranged in age from 6-months to 86-years old. There were eight children/youth in our delegation, and two of us (Maureen Hill and I) were traveling with grandchildren. This presented occasional challenges of creating and scheduling activities that engaged the age diversity of our group, but also new and interesting opportunities. For example—again quoting from John Paul's journal:



Rubén Darío students and John Paul

“In the afternoon we went to Modesto's house where Maureen, Harper and Emalee are staying. Modesto took Grandpa and me to a baseball stadium where kids were training in a Baseball Academy. The coach Jacob and the kids were very welcoming and friendly.

We practiced throwing, fielding grounders and batting. I had fun.”

Of course, since both Mia and John Paul are students at Lincoln Elementary, visiting classes at Rubén Darío School was a special highlight for them—as well as for all of us. A few more reflections from John Paul:

“I went to Rubén Darío school again today. Mia and I went to Aña’s third grade class and worked on math. It was interesting to be in one of their classes. Then I went to the

Comedor Infantil and played games with the kids and helped get lunch ready. While I did all this Grandpa went back to the organic farm with Ian, Maureen, Emalee and Harper. They were sifting compost and filling potting soil bags to transplant seedlings.”

John Paul and I find ourselves coming back to where we started in writing this article—remembering the genuine hospitality and kindness of the family we had an opportunity to get to know and have fun with. Our extended family also included Kenia López, one of the TSTSCA scholarship recipients who prepared a very good dinner for all of us one evening.

On our last full day in Santo Tomás, several of us in the delegation (the families with kids) invited our host families to join us for a day at a rural recreational center with several swimming pools. As John Paul remembered the day:

John Paul and I find ourselves coming back to where we started in writing this article—remembering the genuine hospitality and kindness of the family we had an opportunity to get to know and have fun with.

“Our family was very excited because the kids had never had an opportunity to go there. The other families went by local bus, but Doña Flora didn’t want to ride in a crowded bus for an hour. So Nereyda and Grandpa arranged for a neighbor with a large pick-up truck to take our family to the park and back.

It was a lot of fun, especially playing in the pools with Nereyda’s father, Ronald, who really enjoyed playing with us kids! He gave us back flips in the pool. We didn’t get to know him until the last few days of our visit because he works in Managua.

In the afternoon we had quite an adventure getting home. All of the buses back to Santo Tomás were totally packed and none of the other families could get a ride home. So Grandpa talked to our truck driver about taking everyone in our group in the back of his truck. There were 30 of us in the truck, and some of us had to ride standing up. I could never do this at home, and it was fun!”



I have followed and supported our TSTSCA since its formation—including sponsoring TESC students’ study abroad contracts. I would have had a wonderful time in any case, but traveling with my grandson made this trip so much more meaningful to me, my family and—I’m

convinced—to the Jarquín/ López family that hosted us. Near the end of our stay, John Paul said to our family: “when I come back next year...” I had to do some cautionary explaining, but Aña, Lismary and Yewdring gave him a big hug. 🤗



TSTSCA works with a sister community organization in Santo Tomás, the *Comité para Desarrollo Comunal* (Committee for Community Development or CDC) on projects that support basic needs, education, and human dignity. TSTSCA provides ongoing financial and other support for these three CDC projects: **Comedor Infantil**, the Children’s Free Lunch Program; **Biblioteca**, the library; **Becas**, Scholarships.

Delegations to Nicaragua are self-supporting and generously hosted by the people of Santo Tomás.

Delegations from Santo Tomás are generously supported by the Olympia community.

See our website at <http://www.oly-wa.us/tstsc/> You can also friend us on Facebook

The TSTSCA typically meets on the 3rd Monday of each month at 7pm (6:30 potluck) at Lincoln Elementary at 21st and Washington In Olympia from September through June. and elsewhere in the summer months. Call ahead (360) 943-8642 or email tstsc@gmail.com to confirm date and location if you’d like to attend.

My spring in Santo Tomás

By Mollie Gaitz (interviewed by Jean Ebehardt)

I recently spent three months in Nicaragua, where my mother's side of the family has lived for generations in Managua. I had visited *mi abuela, tíos y tías, primos y primas* many times from Houston with my mom, dad and sister, but hadn't ever spent a nice, long stretch of time in the country. I was excited to be there again and to strengthen my Spanish language skills. I traveled to Santo Tomás with a small group of students from Evergreen. We spent the previous two quarters in Olympia learning about Latin America's history through language and literature studies. I was also a very active co-coordinator of the student group *Movimiento Estudiantil Xican@ de Aztlán (MEXA)*, a local chapter of the national organization that promotes higher education, *cultura* and *historia*. I was really busy juggling class, homework, involvement with MEXA and then winter quarter ended suddenly, and it was time to get on a plane, celebrate my sister's wedding in Tucson and then fly to Nicaragua.

I stayed with Modesto and Johana's family in Santo Tomás. Modesto was on a delegation north to Olympia in 2002 and has lived a life dedicated to progress in Nicaragua, the healthy development of youth and everything baseball. I shared a bedroom with Tanya who is two years older than me, has already graduated from college and is working in the field of engineering and project management. Her brother Werner

I volunteered in the *Clínica Popular* in the mornings and spent half of my time in the laboratory and the rest of the time at the front desk, doing intake and recording people's blood pressure, pulse, temperature and height/weight. In the lab with Luís and Ysamara, I learned how to prepare blood samples for the centrifuge and how to read urine samples (does anyone reading this have a good microscope to do-



Tomásin@s and Evergreen Student Delegation: doña Aurora, Normantina, doña Olendia, Auricia, Stephanie, Alex, doña Facunda, Allie, Yuri, Maria Isabel, Mollie, Marissa, Caroline and Heather

I appreciate all of the support I've received along the path I am taking towards working in the health field. I really enjoyed volunteering at the clinic in Santo Tomás and getting to know the staff there.

nate?). I liked the immediate results of finding pathogens and knowing the doctors at the clinic would prescribe the right medications to take care of their situations. I watched patients get vaccines and blood draws and thought about my upcoming training in the health center at Evergreen as a Student Medical Assistant (SMA). It's late September now and I have just completed my initial training in the center. I will be an SMA all year and will be doing blood draws, giving vaccines and lots of other things on students! I appreciate all of the support I've received along the path I am taking towards working in the health field. I really enjoyed volunteering at the clinic in Santo Tomás and getting to know the staff there. It's a team that serves people in need. The clinic handles minor medical emergencies too. One day, a young man came in with his lip split wide open like it had been sliced deeply with a knife. He had fallen from his horse and landed face first on a rock. I watched the doctor and nurse clean the wound of a lot of dirt and blood, and then

stitch it up. I don't think they administered any anesthetic; I felt so queasy in my stomach. I know I'll get used to it eventually.

My host family sister and I tried to watch the nightly episodes of *Señorita Pólvora*, a TV series from México about Valentina, a young, beautiful and wealthy woman who falls for a hit man connected to a powerful drug cartel. When I missed a show because of a commitment to a student delegation activity, Tanya would fill me in on what happened. I did the same for her on nights when she couldn't be there. I do regret not being able to finish the whole series while in Nicaragua! It was great to share that time of intrigue and

drama with Tanya. At the end of the quarter, my family flew from Houston to meet me in Santo Tomás and stay with Tanya's family/*mi familia Tomásina*. I was nervous about how it would go, but they enjoyed meeting each other.

My parents bought a LOT of local *quesos* to take back to our family in Managua and also some to take back

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Cemetery Stories

Seamus Petrie, member of Summer 2015
community delegation

In our trip to Santo Tomás, I had the honor and privilege to take a walk with other delegates through the town's 100-year-old cemetery. Doña Olendia, with Grace's translation, shared her stories of the dead.

This cemetery was not like cemeteries in Olympia. Most graveyards in the NW are vast, grassy lawns, speckled with discrete plaques or headstones. In Santo Tomás, the cemetery is crowded and built up, with winding paths among the tombs. Because of the risk of flooding in heavy rain, and because of a lack



Cemetery, Santo Tomás

Mollie's spring in Santo Tomás

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to Texas. Chontales, the department where Santo Tomás is located, is the dairy capitol of Nicaragua and is famous for being the land *donde los ríos son de leche y las piedras de cuajada* /where the rivers flow with milk and the rocks are made of cheese.

Another highlight for me in Santo Tomás was teaching Zumba in the Nicamol recreation center. I offered a free class on Friday evenings and it turned out to be pretty popular and a lot of fun. There were 30 people dancing with me one night! My final academic project tied together issues about health, nutrition, exercise, my work at the clinic and my Zumba classes.

Our time in Nicaragua included language classes, seminars and writing on the readings assigned by our professor, attending numerous presentations, meeting the scholarship students, traveling to other parts of the country and visiting organizations. There were challenges on the delegation and good times too. I learned a lot, speak stronger Spanish now, am even more convinced I will work in health care, and I look forward to returning in the next year or two. *¡Hasta pronto mi querida Nicaragua!* ☺

of space in the crowded cemetery, said Olendia, people are entombed in vaults above ground. Most vaults and tombs in the cemetery are as brightly colored as the buildings downtown—yellows and pinks and robins egg blues that feel incongruously whimsical compared to somber grey stones found in cemeteries I'd visited before.

But like in every cemetery, the gravesites offer hints at the lives of their occupants. Some are large tombs: ornate, decorated with statues, well-maintained. Others are spare slabs marked with simple crosses. One gravesite, early in our walk, is covered in grass.

Olendia and her daughter Kimberlin

explain that the beloved math teacher buried here last year wanted his body to return to the earth. Olendia and Kimberlin share a burst of stories about him: He was the first person to teach typing in Santo Tomás. He was a writer and poet. He sang, and danced, and called out hypocrisy where he saw it. El Pollón, he was called, "the big chicken."

In the lowest corner of the cemetery, later in our walk, the candy-colored tile disappears, and all of the vaults are bare cement. Some have no identifying information, while others have names and dates carved crudely into the stone. Crosses are made of wood, or metal pipe. Where there are visible dates, the lifespans in this section of the cemetery end in 1986 or 1987. People buried here were victims of the war with the Contras. Olendia's stories about the men buried in this section of the cemetery are graphic and tragic, too much so to reprint here.

Olendia showed us the final resting places of priests, of politicians, of children, and of her own mother. The cemetery was full of too many stories, and our walk was too brief. But the rich history that the cemetery offered was the history of people whose lives won't be commemorated in museums or official records. Instead, the graves were like old family photographs, concrete objects that spark strands of half-forgotten memories and stories passed through generations. I was deeply grateful to hear just a few of these. ☺

Barbara Keyt, Founding TSTSCA Member

Seano Izzarone

My story about Barbara begins with my interview for the spring 2001 study abroad program sponsored by TSTSCA in conjunction with Alice Nelson's program of Spanish language and Latin American studies at Evergreen. Barbara was part of the four person interview committee, which included faculty members Nancy Allen and Alice, and Steph Guilloud of TSTSCA (now staff with Project South). I was excited for the opportunity to study and volunteer in Olympia's sister city Santo Tomás in Nicaragua and so, after feeling like I absolutely bombed the interview, I was surprised to get a call from Barbara the following day saying that I had been accepted. Thanks Barbara! 14 years ago, I spent a transformative 3 months in Santo Tomás and had no idea I would eventually circle back and move to Nicaragua, reinvent myself as a baker, get married and have a family.

During the trainings for members of the 2001 student delegation and at meetings of the sister county association, I was able to see who many of the key players were in the organization, one of whom was Barbara, a founding member of TSTSCA (created in October 1989) along with Jean Eberhardt and Maureen Hill, among others. This organization has always relied on members and partners doing what they can to help move forward the goals of the committee, namely supporting our sister city and all Nicaraguans in their struggles for dignity and social justice, but it is the hard work of the members of what is known as the steering committee that are at the core of the organization. It is their work, along with the work of our Tomásino friends in Nicaragua, that help keep this organization strong and vital; there are few members who have dedicated more time and energy to this effort than Barbara Keyt. She can always be counted

on to attend monthly meetings and do whatever she can to help perform the day-to-day tasks that need to get done. Mailing party for the newsletter? Barbara will be there. Plant or rummage sale needs volunteers? You can count on Barbara. Calls need to be made to round up other volunteers? Barbara is on it.

That is how I came to first know Barbara – an elder in our organization and in our community who is a shining example of how to participate in a social organization or movement. Not just be present, which is also important, but also to act, in ways both large and small, to move the work forward. This made a strong impression on me as a young person learning how to interact within my community and the world as a whole, and continues to inspire me to act to this day.

I also got to know Barbara better through a lot of time spent with her and her husband Edwin and their family. At the time, I was a volunteer tutor for ESL (English as Second Language) and adult literacy with Mason County Literacy (now Sound Learning) in Shelton. Since I lived in Olympia at the time, I often stayed overnight with Barbara and Edwin at their home in



Barbara and Edwin hosted Doña Aurora in their home when she visited Olympia in 1996 on the second delegation north, and so it was great to see these two matriarchs share a warm embrace (as well as a dance or two)

Shelton and shared meals and warm, spirited conversations with them at least twice a week. What a treat! Many times the conversation turned to Nicaragua or Santo Tomás, and I really enjoyed hearing stories from Barbara and Edwin about their time spent there. As Barbara was helping to start TSTSCA in Olympia, Edwin was already living and volunteering

his machinist skills in El Cuá, Jinotega, Nicaragua on an off-the-grid micro-hydroelectric project there. He was recruited by Mira Brown (Evergreen '84) after her colleagues American civil engineer Ben Linder and Nicaraguans Sergio Hernández and Pablo Rosales were murdered by the u.s. backed Contra forces in

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Barbara Keyt

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1987 for their participation in the progress of their country and for measuring up a stream for the project. Edwin stepped up and spent five years working in El Cuá, and upon his final return to the Pacific Northwest, became an active member of TSTSCA alongside Barbara. His spirited and informed editorials in the Shelton Journal railing against u.s. imperialism and war were legendary. After Edwin's passing in 2008, Barbara has continued to stay active in the sister city project.

In late June of this year, my family and I had the pleasure of hosting Barbara in our home in Santo Tomás. Although she is a founding member of TSTSCA and has been to northern Nicaragua twice, she had never been to Santo Tomás, Chontales. When the opportunity presented itself for her to participate in the 2015 Community Delegation to Santo Tomás, Barbara jumped at the chance to finally visit.

And what a visit! I can't express the joy I felt to have my good friend and comrade here in our home and to see the love and heartfelt gratitude that so many of our Nicaraguan friends have for her. At the welcoming bienvenida there was a touching reunion of Barbara and Aurora Baez Bravo, a founding member of the Comité para Desarrollo Comunal, our sister organization in Santo Tomás. Barbara and Edwin hosted Doña Aurora in their home when she visited Olympia in 1996 on the second delegation north, and so it was great to see these two matriarchs share a warm embrace (as well as a dance or two) and reminisce. In our home, Barbara quickly became a beloved member of our family, reading bilingual books with our daughter Fergie, making friends with our normally fierce dogs, trying out typical Nicaraguan dishes, and playing and dancing with our youngest son Patrick. I was really made aware of just how special she was for all of us when Patrick cried, which he rarely does, when his abuelita Barbara had to finally leave us and return home to Shelton. Even my wife Suhey, who is also not prone to strong emotional displays, cried when Barbara left and still tears up when we talk about her visit with us.

I enjoyed spending many nights and afternoons chatting with my old friend and sharing stories. Like the one when Edwin came back very ill from Nicaragua and had surgery to remove a kidney infected with a blood-borne parasite. When he regained his strength and wanted to drive to El Cuá with much needed tools, Barbara took a leave from her position as the Emergency

Communication Operator at Evergreen (whenever she took vacations, they had to replace her with two workers!) and they drove south together. Many stories are inside that story including when the wheel fell off in southern Mexico, six campesinos lifted the car to put the wheel back on! So, there they were in 1991, in their mid-60s, driving a souped up VW bug full of heavy tools from Shelton to El Cuá; what gumption! When they finally got into Ni-

caragua after three long weeks of travel, they had to ford a few rivers, where there are now bridges, to get up into the mountainous area of El Cuá. Barbara met all of Edwin's friends over the next two weeks and also claimed them as hers. She lamented having to return

to work, which she did, but started making plans for a longer visit. The micro-hydro project was eventually completed and the plant went live, lighting up a small community and keeping vaccines at the right temperature in the clinic instead of having to go get blocks of ice from back down across those rivers every few days. I really love it when she recounts that story. I know they are remembered as fondly in El Cuá as

my family and I feel about them. We will share stories about Barbara Keyt visiting us in Santo Tomás for years to come. These stories help us keep her close to our hearts and help us remember who she is and what she means to us and to our community. Stories that help us remember one of my favorite people in this world, someone who has been and continues to be a great example of an active world citizen. Thanks Barbara! From the bottom of my heart, thank you, for who you are and all you have done. 🌟



Seano with Barbara Keyt



Librarian Normantina Aguilar (delegation to Olympia 2004) with Barbara at the library in Santo Tomás.



**From the
summer 2015**

**community delegation
photo album**

I support the projects and goals of the Thurston Santo Tomás Sister County Association

My contribution is enclosed:

- \$15. Help defray newsletter costs
- \$30. One week's salary support for a librarian in Santo Tomás
- \$40. One month's partial scholarship support for one student from Santo Tomás
- \$100. Two weeks' salary support for the Coordinator of the *Comedor Infantil*
- \$480. Full year partial scholarship support for one student in Santo Tomás
- I'll make a monthly contribution of \$ _____ to TSTSCA (code# 0315175) through the WA State Combined Fund Drive

I am interested in going to Nicaragua with a delegation or on the TESC student trip

I want to volunteer with TSTSCA. Please send me more information.

These are my skills or interests: _____

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Inside:

Meet Ana Maria Rocha, a new scholar from Santo Tomás, in her first year of college.

Read stories from a few members of the two delegations to Santo Tomás, Chontales, Nicaragua this year.

Save the dates and support the scholarships for youth in our sister town:

Annual Rummage Sale Extraordinaire
AKA “beat the winter blues” at Lincoln Elementary in early February

Annual Perennial Plant Sale on Saturday, May 7, 2016 on Olympia Westside.
Donate plants, buy plants!

Return service requested

Ana Maria Rocha – New scholar!

My name is Ana Maria Rocha and I am in my first year of studying Public Accounting and Finance at a branch of the public university. I travel to Juigalpa on Saturdays to attend the National Autonomous University of Nicaragua for all day classes. The schedule allows me to keep my job as a nanny in the home of a teacher from 6:30am to 4pm or later on weekdays. My mother died of cancer when I was 10 years old and my older sister assumed the responsibilities of keeping the younger siblings together in our home. Our three oldest siblings have already made their lives in Costa Rica and out in the town of Rama. I am happy to contribute the little I earn to our household expenses and to help my brother who has physical disabilities.

I grew up eating at the *comedor infantil*, one of the CDC social projects. My siblings and I all did, because we needed food. It is an important resource in Santo Tomás. This scholarship project is also coordinated by the CDC and is making a huge difference in the

lives of students like me who would not otherwise be able to continue their studies. I am thankful that I was chosen to participate. The library at the *comedor* has also been of critical support to me and my studies. My brother receives equine therapy at the *finca modelo* (demonstration or model farm) another CDC project which is helping him develop more confidence.



Because I had never been outside of Santo Tomás, it was challenging for me to get on that bus to leave for university classes. Little by little I am getting used to it and becoming more sure of myself. I do want to be economically stable and this motivates me to study and work hard. Another challenge is getting access to a computer to do my homework. The ciber cafés are expensive and sometimes full, and the hours they are closed are terribly inconvenient (Sundays), so students

like me without easy access have to scramble to borrow them from other people. It would be wonderful to have computers and the internet in the library.

Going to university has been a huge change in my life and I am excited to see where it will lead! Thank you for your support of me and the other scholars. I enjoyed meeting both delegations from Olympia this year. ☺