

# Olympia/Santo Tomás Update

**US/Nicaragua Solidarity—Since 1988**  
**Winter 2012**

An occasional  
update on what's  
going on  
with the  
Thurston–Santo Tomás  
Sister County  
Association

## Nothing like the real thing

*Alan and Jane Mountjoy–Venning*

We have been associated with TSTSCA for a long time. Like many, we were distraught by the Reagan Administration's policies in Nicaragua. We remember and were heartened and inspired by the Olympia Construction Brigade's early work in the 80's and kept abreast of TSTSCA's progress. Our children, Cliff and Helen (called Abey), attended Lincoln Elementary school and we were delighted to be at assemblies and community events where members of the delegations from Santo Tomás told of their experiences. We remember the



*Delegation and friends at Managua, Nicaragua airport, July 2011.*

excitement at Lincoln as the school welcomed two students from Santo Tomás, Mixi and Yimi, who came to live with Stephen Bray, Diane Dakin and their kids for a month or so in 1998. We benefited from Lincoln teachers who went on a delegation to Santo Tomás and shared their stories and helped make real the lives of kids in another community for our students.

We had always hoped to join a delegation and felt privileged that Alan, Jane and Cliff could travel to Santo Tomás with the July 2011 community delegation. Much of

the advance material confirmed to us that we were informed and prepared for the journey. That may have

## What we do:

### Projects in Santo Tomás

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 CDC projects:

- ▶ **Comedor Infantil:** Children's Free Lunch Program
- ▶ **Biblioteca:** Library
- ▶ **Becas:** Scholarships for Higher Education

### Sister School Relationship:

TSTSCA helps facilitate a sister school relationship between Lincoln Elementary School in Olympia and

*Escuela Rubén Darío* in Santo Tomás. Students and faculty from both schools correspond and families, teachers, and administrators have been part of exchange delegations. The Lincoln site council sends periodic financial support and materials.

### Delegations

Thurston-Santo Tomás Sister County Association has led self-supporting Olympia area student and community delegations to learn, volunteer and build mutually supportive friendships in Santo Tomás—over 130 people from the Olympia area have personally visited Santo Tomás. We have also supported and welcomed nine delegations of 28 *Tomasinos* to learn, educate and build mutually supportive friendships in the Olympia area. *We are planning now for the next delegation from Nicaragua in Spring of 2012!*

been true, but the actual experience of being among Tomasinos created a much deeper connection than facts and photos ever could.

We were honored to be in the Segura-Guerrero home during our stay this past summer—so much wisdom, energy, and spirit is found there. Encountering so many others involved with CDC projects or active with Escuela Rubén Darío made a deep impression. Despite Jane and Alan's limited Spanish skills, we had many opportunities to sense the legacy of two communities working together over many years. The strength and resiliency of that connection was visible in so many ways. It was both humbling and inspiring to witness the work *Tomasinos* give daily on behalf of their community.

Our support of CDC projects, while important, is but a small part of the overall fabric of the community. Projects are vital, but people and the connections between them are central to the Association. Our experience with the delegation and the many committed people we met in Santo Tomás confirmed to us that this local yet international effort is a worthy one to forge a deeper connection with. ☺



## FSLN's Daniel Ortega Wins Re-Election

Alex Becker

On November 6<sup>th</sup>, 2011, the announcement came: Daniel Ortega, President of Nicaragua, was re-elected in a landslide victory. The Sandinista leader received nearly 63 percent of the vote, compared to 31 percent received by second-place finisher Fabio Gadea, a right-wing radio host. Nearly 70 percent of Nicaraguans turned out to vote, an unprecedented figure in the Central American country's politics, where the threat of US intervention and fear of war have for many years prevented full democratic participation in the electoral process.

The sweeping win comes at a time when the need for social programs and investment in infrastructure continues to be a pressing concern and a matter of survival for the majority of the country's population. Nicaragua is the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere after Haiti, and more than half the population is severely underemployed. Since 2006, Ortega has implemented a variety of anti-poverty programs such as "Plan Roof," "Zero Hunger," "Zero Usury," and "Streets for the People," with the material support of Venezuela and Cuba, and the effects have been noteworthy. For instance, in 2010, rural poverty fell by 5 percent, largely as a result of the "Zero Hunger" program,

### To the Olympia delegation

Thank you for the beautiful friendships cultivated and harvested over ten days in July.

Once again, I thank you for being part of the development of my *pueblo* and for bringing support to one of the critical needs of our community, social and solidarity development, which is in education. You provide university scholarships to youth of little economic resources, and I am thankful for being one of them. I am also grateful for your support of the library project, which is part the children's free lunch center, where many youth and kids do their research. I think these are the most beautiful projects of the C.D.C.

Thanks to Jean, Grace, Seano, Jane, Alan, Cliff, Moira, Kim, Maureen, and Whitney for your sincere

and true friendship, and for the work you do for and with our *pueblo*.

I hope you have enjoyed getting to know our culture, our traditions, our Nicaraguan past, present and future. Nicaragua will always be connected to Olympia because you are the most Nica Northamericans in the world!

May your hearts hold our images and our culture, which is unlike any other! May the *gallopinto* we shared with you continue to sustain our friendship.

Your friend for life,

Elvis Aguilar

*Elvis is a student of agro-economic engineering who tells us he wakes each day and says, "I want to study, for myself, for my family, and for my community. I want to work, and I want to help my country eradicate poverty and promote education." ☺*



Elvis with Grace Cox

**Note:** TSTSCA does not support individual travel costs to Nicaragua. All delegates travelling to Santo Tomás pay their own way. This includes community members, Evergreen students, and others.

which allotted rural women a cow, a pig, and hens to support rural families' self-sufficiency. Such programs, combined with improved education and health services, have successfully raised the living standards for many Nicaraguans. Given the success of such programs, it's hardly surprising that Ortega was re-elected.

Nonetheless, US officials and right-wing party members of Nicaragua's elite have criticized the election results, claiming fraud and warning of an impending dictatorship. Ortega's alliance with Venezuela, whose petrodollars help to subsidize many of Nicaragua's social programs for the poor, is of particular concern to the United States: It indicates a continued loosening of their political grip on the region. (The US, of course, continues its history of supporting Central American leaders selectively: at the same time as it criticized Nicaragua's recent election results, it also applauded Otto Pérez's electoral win in Guatemala, a former military general who has vowed to continue fighting the

"war on drugs" yet has been accused by human rights groups of being directly involved in committing acts of genocide during the 1980s war.)

There is no doubt that the United States would have certainly preferred a right wing, relentlessly 'pro-business' candidate to win this election. Yet Ortega, despite his anti-imperialist rhetoric and refusal to allow strings-attached 'aid' programs to re-enter the country, has also opened Nicaragua to foreign businesses, many US-owned, through the promotion of "special economic zones" for low-wage and tax-free manufacturing for export.

Ortega as a political figure has not been without criticism over the past few years, even from many on Nicaragua's left who point to his strict anti-abortion policies and promotion of free-trade economic zones, but it is clear that his expanded social programs and health and education services over his past term have delivered substantially enough to secure the vote of the majority of Nicaraguans. ☺



## Evergreen Student Reflections

**Maddy Stephens:** Santo Tomás, Nicaragua. It lights up about a thousand cerebral passageways in my brain, a place I could talk to you about for days. It's a place where I lived for around four months, in a pretty little concrete house decorated by mosquitos and brotherly love and mango trees and populated by seven *Tomasinos*. I met my Nica family through happenstance. A biographical essay written in twelve point arial font and broken Spanish made me unofficially part of Lesner Villega and Solieth Morales' family.

My history with *Tomasinos* started before I was even born, as a birth-right that came with my American passport and a pretty arbitrarily assigned quantity of international privilege. My life played out in parallel to the lives of Solieth and Lesner and newly born Lesnercito much sooner than I even realized that the three of them existed. Just like dandelion seeds, distributed erratically across earth's surface, waiting for the wind to come, marching each of us in

rhythm with our respective life paths, predefined by power structures and wars and geographical distance.

My country moved into this little Central American country and shook stuff up in a big way. The U.S. Government supported the Contra War which devastated the people of Santo Tomás, and the people of Nicaragua as a whole. The community of Santo Tomás is infinitely different from the one where we live in Olympia Washington, mainly due to economic advantage achieved through crimes committed by the U.S. government. This clan of *Tomasinos* and I became close quickly. Sitting in half circles around a television set, watching Spanish dub overs of American action movies, cutting up yucca for dinner, brushing our teeth shoulder-to-shoulder, waking up at unforgivable hour of five a.m to walk 45 minutes to wash our laundry in the river... those were our principal ingredients for friendship during the first leg of my stay as an Evergreen student delegate. My life in Santo Tomás eased into a swing of friendship and instant coffee, and gradually,



*Maddy with Spanish teacher Yessenia and son*

transformed into some real, nitty-gritty-hands-and-knees-brother-sister kinda love. We were living. And we were doing it together, side by side, from inside the gecko-frequented walls of the Morales-Villega household.

War and death happened in Santo Tomás. Alongside deep memories of war, corn grows, gets harvested and pounded into tortillas, hopes of children swell with jubilant bean-eating zest at the *comedor infantil*, grandmothers and grandfathers get older and continue to tell their stories, families expand and then contract, people fall in love. Life persists, it moves, it allows for re-birth. Together, under one tiny tin roof, we pushed back the barriers of war, economics, and politics. My friendship with the Villega-Morales family is something far less clinical than stock market scripts or U.S. foreign policies. Instead it was born from laughter, heart-to-hearts on sweltering hot days, and late night marathons of B-list Hollywood action films. ☸

**Heather Earp:** Last spring in Santo Tomás, I was asked to teach English with a fellow Evergreen student in a preschool and also Escuela Rubén Darío, an elementary school which has a sister-school relationship with Lincoln Elementary here in Olympia. It was a beautifully frustrating task. I learned a lot, and I only wish I could do it again. I'd be better prepared this time to attempt to engage the children who are all very big bundles of energy.



*Heather at Escuela Rubén Darío with Martha Lazo and students*

We were just getting into the groove of having almost-40-minute sessions with each class on a rotating morning schedule when we found out that the school was going to have its roof replaced. Renovation meant that the upper grades would have class in the afternoon and evening instead of the morning, which was the

only time when we could volunteer. Surprise! Very little notice was given to the staff of Rubén Darío, but when the Ministry of Education offers to help replace the rusted-through metal roof right before the rainy season, there's no choice but to accept.

Yessenia Solis' 4th grade class was moved to the outside covered cement patio. She told me she visited Olympia in 1998. Well, keeping a large class of ten-year olds focused becomes much more daunting when the class is located outside and at the main entrance to the school! We tried not to be distracted by the comings and goings as we called out new words over the sound of hammering nails and sliding metal. While teaching in a 2nd grade classroom, we literally watched the roof disappear from over our heads. As a bonus, I guess we reached a broader audience; some of the construction workers learned "head, shoulders, knees and toes!" The outside play area became a danger zone as piles of rusty corrugated tin roof and old bent nails waited to be properly disposed.

Every day, the young students were excited and full of boundless energy. Their little fingers offered us sticky pieces of homemade candy and their big eyes asked us be swung around/picked up/hugged. On one of my last days in Santo Tomás, one of my 4th grade students approached me as I left the internet café on the corner. She was laden with a heavy bucket of enchiladas for sale. After school she wasn't

balancing soccer practice and piano lessons, she was selling her mom's enchiladas on the streets to contribute to her family's livelihood; she couldn't go home until she sold them all. I was struck by this young working student's reality, a reflection of the great disparities in our world. I am committed to working to change these inequities, and my relationships in Santo Tomás are a motivating force. ☸

## Whitney returns and picks up where she left off ten years ago...

*Whitney Friddle participated in a community delegation to Santo Tomás with her mom in July of 2001 at the age of 9 and returned in the Summer of 2011 at the age of 19.*

When I was nine years old I travelled to Santo Tomás, Nicaragua, and as soon as I arrived I remember how

quickly my host family, the Seguras, felt like family to me. My mom and I stayed with them for about three weeks and it honestly felt like home. Kilyer, Mixi and Yimi (my host siblings) were the older siblings I always wished my brothers had been. Masiel (my host cousin)

became a close friend even though there was a language barrier. The experience I had at the age of nine was indescribable and unforgettable. It changed the way I view the world and had an unending impact on me, on who I wanted to become and who I strive to be today.

I have wanted to go back to Santo Tomás since I left, having promised Masiel I would return. I was ecstatic whenever a delegation came north or south to help us keep our friendship alive through letters and small gifts. I dreamed about it forever, and I was beginning to think it would never happen, but this year, the timing and circumstances were perfect.



*Whitney and members of the Segura-Guerrero family of Santo Tomás. Right inset, in 2001; above, in July 2011.*

The project that stood out to me the most, at nine, was Juanita's extraordinary preschool where I volunteered. I also remember playing tag games in the streets with all the kids, and the huge fiesta for independence. I remember too many things to count. The time that Freddy, Masiel, Mixi and some other children who played with us took me up to the farm to go exploring and check out a really cool cave they had found. I remember how Mixi gave me the best cocoa drinks I have ever had and that she sent me home with the mix, but no matter how hard I tried to recreate it, the drink was never the same. The thick homemade corn tortillas that were unlike anything I had ever tasted as was Efrain's chicken soup

he made most afternoons for lunch.

Rosita and Efrain's family left a huge impact on me, but I didn't expect to walk up to the CDC building this summer and be embraced by Efrain with tears in his eyes and joy at my return. It felt surreal going back after such a long time and at the same time as if I had never left. Showering with a pail and water scoop, which was the hardest thing for me when I was younger felt completely normal this time around. Even the heat and humidity felt like a home-coming of sorts.

The thing that impacted me the most about my visit to Santo Tomás as an adult was seeing the way people in Santo Tomás love each other for who they are and not based on what they own or the perception they have of each other. When



I was younger it made sense to be nice and loving of everyone around you, no matter what they had. But growing up in the United States, youth are taught through social constructions and peer pressure that what we have and what we look

like is the most important. So it was beautiful to see and be reminded that there are places where you can "come as you are" and still be accepted and loved for everything you are and everything you are not. Returning this past summer was the first time in a long time that I felt like I could be me and be loved for who I am without being judged by anyone. I was just as playful and friendly and open as I was when I was nine years old. I know that the love and longing I feel for my family in Santo Tomás is mutual. ☺

## Moira goes to Santo Tomás (with her mom)

**A little background:** The summer delegation to Santo Tomás consisted of nine persons, including the two coordinators. Our ages ranged from 9 to 69. Moira, our youngest delegate, had first learned about the relationship with Santo Tomás while she was attending kindergarten at Lincoln Elementary School. (Lincoln has a sister-school relationship with Rubén Darío in Santo Tomás with teacher exchanges, pen pal student exchanges and financial support from Lincoln for Rubén Darío students with the greatest need.) On her own initiative, Moira undertook a special project in which she (and her team) took pictures in a Lincoln class, delivered them with letters and friendship necklaces to a class at Rubén Darío. She and her team then took pictures of the students in the class at Rubén Darío with the idea that she will share those pictures with the

students at Lincoln who sent the original letters.

**Hello!** My name is Moira; I'm 10 years old, and last July I went to Nicaragua! I stayed with Pedro, Fátima and Franier (and, of course, my mom was there).

On my first day in Santo Tomás, there was a big welcome party. There was singing and dancing and I even made a friend! Her name is Joselín, she danced the traditional dance (*Baile Folklórico*). We all played Bingo and had a scavenger hunt.

After that my mom and I went home to go to sleep. When I woke up I heard this noise, it went *tromp tromp tromp* on the roof. *tromp tromp tromp*. My mom and I couldn't figure out what it was until it walked on the plastic part of the roof and we could see it was a bird.

In the morning, my mom and I walked out of our room

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*Inside:*

- ▶ Nicaragua's elections
- ▶ Our recent delegations to Santo Tomás



to the main part of the house and saw watermelon and a pineapple drink sitting on the table that Fátima had made for us. Then, the cattle drive started and all these cows were running through the road in front of the house; all these different colors everywhere black, brown, white, red and tan cows were everywhere!

A few days later I went to the Escuela Rubén Darío with Maureen, Whitney, my mom Kim, Cliff, Jane, Alan, Grace and Jean, who were the other people in the summer delegation to Santo Tomás. When I walked in the gates to Rubén Darío all of the kids mobbed me. I couldn't understand what they



*Moira with friends at Rubén Darío*

were saying because it was all in Spanish. A couple of kids started playing hide and seek with me and then we played soccer with some other kids. Our team lost. Next, we played a game where all of the kids would make a

circle and one of the kids would go in the middle and dance. Everybody else would sing, then everybody would quickly sit down and the last person down would have to go be in the middle. I kept having to be in the middle because I didn't quite understand the rules of the game.

After about a week and a half we left to come home to Olympia. If you're a kid and you go to Santo Tomás, you will make lots of friends! ☺

**[www.oly-wa.us/tstsc](http://www.oly-wa.us/tstsc) • [tstsc@gmail.com](mailto:tstsc@gmail.com) • (360)943-8642**

TSTSCA meetings are generally on the 3rd Monday of each month from 7–9pm at Lincoln Elementary in Olympia; call (360) 943-8642 to confirm location or for other questions about getting involved.