

Olympia/Santo Tomás News

US/Nicaragua Solidarity—Since 1988
Spring 2012

An occasional
update on what's
going on
with the
Thurston—Santo Tomás
Sister Community
Association

Amigas Tomasinas Coming to Olympia this April!

Visitors from Santo Tomás, Chontales, Nicaragua will soon be here! Two teachers from the Rubén Darío elementary school will arrive on April 10th to get to know their sister school teachers, students and families at Lincoln Elementary. Martha Irene Lazo and Heylin Amarely López, will be coming to Olympia in April. Heather Earp and Joey Rose Cardoso, from the spring 2011 Evergreen student delegation, volunteered at Rubén Darío and found Martha and Heylin to be especially enthusiastic and dedicated teachers. These women will compose our tenth delegation from our sister town since 1990. Past delegations have included health care providers, teachers, artisans, farmers, students, librarians, and a poet. This upcoming three week delegation of two has a distinctly educational and cultural exchange focus.



Heylin in her classroom



Heylin and Martha

Our relationship with Santo Tomás is grounded in reciprocity. The TSTSCA has organized a number of Olympia area community delegations and Evergreen State College student delegations, which have all been received with generosity in Nicaragua. While there, we volunteer in community projects, live with families and learn first hand about Nicaragua's significant challenges and community responses (as well as government responses). Inviting delegations from Santo Tomás allows us to complete the circle of exchange and learning from each others' communities. While here, our two delegates Martha and Heylin will spend time with students and teachers in each of Lincoln's classrooms. Both of these women are also excited to demonstrate and teach traditional Nicaraguan folkloric dance, *Baile Folklorico*. There are lots of opportunities for you to join

us: there will be lively school assemblies in honor of the visitors, a traditional foods cooking workshop, a trip to Mt. Rainier, enjoying the Procession of the Species (at Capitol and Legion), and a final dance party complete with lessons! See details of dates and times elsewhere in this mailing.

Marcela Abadi, now the principal at Lincoln, participated in letter exchanges with both Martha and Heylin over the years, and is excited to welcome them to her school. Heather Earp and Moira Rice (from the summer 2011 delegation) recently gave a presentation to the Lincoln community; the Lincoln children learned more about their sister school and about the Nicaraguan children with whom they exchange letters and art. The Lincoln house band topped it all off with a solid rendition of "*Nicaragua, Nicaragua-guita*" while everyone sang along.

Please join us in welcoming Martha and Heylin to Olympia and mark your calendars with key dates for our exciting public events! Much of their time will be spent with the Lincoln Elementary community and some of their time will be with important organizations like Safeplace, Proyecto CIELO, and El Centro de la Raza.

Thank you to the Lincoln Elementary community for hosting Martha and Heylin and to the extended Olympia community for supporting this long standing relationship with the people of Santo Tomás. One of the goals for this delegation is to fundraise in support of our programs in Santo Tomás including college scholarship recipients, the Children's Free Lunch program and the small, but well-used public library. The modest, but critical support we provide reaches many young people

in Santo Tomás and our ongoing commitment helps foster continuing education.

Our last newsletter shared a few stories from the spring and summer delegations to Santo Tomás. In this issue, we hear from a few people in our sister town. We also have enclosed a timeline of Nicaragua's history and the

difficult relationship between our countries. Perhaps you have come to the same conclusion that solidarity and citizen diplomacy is more effective at building bridges than military interventions and resource theft. Together, let us build the world we want to live in, one small step at a time.

Meet Our Springtime Visitors

Heylin Amarely López

Born in 1984, Heylin Amarely López attended Rubén Darío when the classes took place on a dirt floor. The kids sat in circles, and Heylin was always in trouble for talking or giggling too much during class. She carried a makeshift backpack; a plastic bag to and from the dusty campus of Rubén Darío. It was a little bit more dangerous to come to and from school then, and during the rainy season, her walk took place on an unpaved road, leaving a thick mud clinging to the soles of her feet. Heylin has now been working at Rubén Darío for 11 years. She studied accounting in Juigalpa, and at the same time supported herself by working at Rubén Darío. After her graduation from university, Heylin witnessed that the shrinking economy left few jobs in the accounting sector. Heylin had always been passionate about her work at Rubén Darío. And so, in the long run, Heylin says she is thankful that the waning accounting market pushed her to pursue a second degree in elementary education.

Heylin has seen Rubén Darío change dramatically throughout the years, and her unique position as an ex-student allows her to give testimony to the significant changes of new buildings and supplies at the school. Many of the teachers who once taught her science and math (begging her to cut the classroom chit-chat all the while) are now her co-workers.

Although Heylin still gets in trouble for talking and giggling, she was, last semester, able to single-handedly lead a class of 44 frenzied fourth graders. The quantity of students at Rubén Darío has always been a problem due to lack of funding for more teachers, but progress has been made.

According to Heylin, in part, the school's evolution owes itself to the fruits of long term-community exchange between Santo Tomás and Olympia. Material aid such as scholarships for RD students and school supplies have allowed teachers to work more efficiently. With the aid, children are able to accomplish more and have a widened array of educational options. Because of the aid, teachers like Heylin have more time to focus on their students, in lieu of time spent scrounging up scissors and markers.

Just as the conditions of schools in Olympia can always be re-evaluated and improved, Rubén Darío is not an oasis of utopian elementary education. The classrooms are still busy and energetic, and have a high student-to-teacher ratio. Poverty and violence, residual scars from the US Contra war, still debilitate students in terms of focus and attendance. Many students are raised by single mothers, or their grandparents, and others face situations of domestic abuse at home. Teachers are, in many ways, awarded responsibilities beyond simply conducting class, and become beacons of support for their large constituencies of students. "I try very hard to be conscious of the distractions children face outside of my classes," Heylin said in a phone interview.

Heylin talks to me on her home phone in the town of Santo Tomás, where she still lives. Her dairy-farmer-husband Josué wakes up early to care for the cows who are an integral piece of the Santo Tomás economy, offering a slew of cheese products found in Santo Tomás. Sticky and stringy white cheeses, whose production owes itself to the likes of Heylin's husband, are a staple in Santo Tomás. "They say that the roads here are paved with cuajada [a dry, crumbly white cheese unique to the region]," Heylin says through an almost indecipherable wall of laughter. Through the phone, I can hear her turning up the volume on the local romantic-ranchero radio station.

Heylin's seven year old son attends Rubén Darío, the school where his parents first met many years ago.



Heylin with her family in Santo Tomás

In her free time, Heylin sings along to the radio and dances, trying to talk her son into picking up the traditional Nicaraguan dance of *baile folklórico*.

A little sad to leave her son and husband behind for a few weeks, Heylin is nevertheless greatly excited to visit Olympia. She wants to talk with teachers from Olympia about curriculum and activities, ideas about education and the pedagogy that umbrellas all these things in two different, but connected, cultures and cities. Driven by the power of personal connections, Heylin is enthused by the prospect of conversations with Olympia locals and invigorated by the power of sharing cultural knowledge (such as her passion for Nicaraguan folkloric dance) with the Olympia community. Heylin is anything but shy in telling me that, she will be thrilled to share with us “Santo Tomás’ best,” rendition of *gallopinto*, a local take on rice and beans.

Martha Irene Lazo

The setting for Martha Lazo’s childhood was in a small town, Acoyapa, 16.5 km away from where she teaches, is slightly smaller than Santo Tomás. Born in 1976, Martha remembers the days when the guns and tanks and arms, leftovers from the US-contra war, were being pulled from the premises of her little town.

Like many other children of her era, Martha witnessed this dramatic change of political atmosphere as a small girl living in the house of her single mother. Her father left home when she was still a baby, and her mother, became the household’s chief executive. Martha watched her mother as she washed dishes, stirred up hot plates of rice and beans, and scrubbed other families’ dirty socks and clothes in the nearby



Martha with her family in Acoyapa

river. Over the shoulder of her single mother’s blood, sweat and tears, Martha observed and learned to replicate these tasks with the horrific US funded Contra war in the foreground. She and her two sisters supported their mother by divvying up the household tasks, cultivating a climate of familial support and sisterly love.

These same two sisters have now migrated to Costa Rica, where they have lived for 20 years. South-bound immigration to Costa Rica is common in Nicaragua, where a still troubled economy struggles to support itself in the face of adversity. One of her sisters earns

enough cash to provide for her family in Costa Rica, and sends what is left back to her family in Acoyapa. Martha tells me that this is a normal thing in Acoyapa and in Santo Tomás, and that many Nica-migrants move to Costa Rica, whose tourist economy yields many more job opportunities.

Martha is incredibly grateful to have the support of her sisters, albeit at a distance. Although she hasn’t seen either of her sisters in two decades, she enjoys the simple luxury of being able to talk and laugh with them on the telephone every once and a while. She uses those skills she learned as a child in her home life now, where she is the care taker for her mother. Martha says that she’s always had a big heart, and is more than happy to reciprocate the domestic generosity gifted to her by her mother during her own upbringing.

Martha is now a mother herself, and is married to a man named Adelardo. Adelardo paints and repairs cars in Acoyapa, working under the sultry Chontales sun. Their son goes to a local elementary school in Acoyapa. Martha is very pleased that her son gets to enjoy focusing on school instead of having to work simultaneously, like many children in the Chontales region. Many of her own students, at present, in Rubén Darío are tired and distracted by long hours before or after class

selling sweets on the street or running errands for local businesses in an attempt to supplement their parents’ income.

Martha’s journey towards becoming a teacher at Rubén Darío was an interesting one. Initially, Martha’s desire for higher education was manifested in the pursuit of a pharmaceutical degree. But as Martha came of age, the prices of education swelled. It seemed much more practical to work as a teacher, because education, Martha says, is always something

necessary to creating a healthy community. “Never will the world be tired of having teachers,” she said.

Her first job in education was in a rural village far out in the countryside. Martha made heroic commutes to and from the countryside by bus and horse, and sometimes by foot. Often times, Martha’s daily trip to work included an hour by bus, and 2.5 additional hours of walking, to and from class. Sometimes the river, which ran parallel to her horseback-ride or walk to work, overflowed and made her journey difficult and chaotic. “This was almost 6 hours of commute daily,”

Martha said, "I'm so thankful to work in Santo Tomás." Now, Martha has been teaching at Rubén Darío for 15 years, travelling 30 minutes by bus. Just like Heylin, she has seen Rubén Darío change greatly with time, and is very happy to have the mutual aid and solidarity which flows between Olympia to Santo Tomás.

Martha volunteers in a project important to students who live on the outskirts of Santo Tomás in a recently developed neighborhood that stands across the highway. Martha goes to these neighborhoods after her classes at Rubén Darío to give specialized lessons for the kids who live there. "It makes me nervous to think about those children crossing the highway. It's busy,



Martha in her classroom

and a lot of people just passing through Santo Tomás might be dangerous people. I don't want the kids to have to interact with that kind of thing just to get an education," said Martha.

Martha is eager to visit Olympia and to further a relationship that she identifies as a cornerstone in the growth of Rubén Darío. She wants to nurture this relationship by meeting students in Olympia and gaining the perspective of their teachers, who operate in very different financial and cultural contexts. She is animated by the concept of her first trip outside the country and her first experience on an airplane, which will culminate ultimately in what she refers to as her "opportunity to share ideas and meet people with love."

Scholarships Clear Pathways to Higher Education

In Fall 2009, TSTSCA initiated a five year scholarship commitment to Santo Tomás, as a priority request of the Committee for Community Development. Higher education is out of reach for most Nicaraguans due to the cost and difficulty obtaining any kind of loan. The cost to support one university student (tuition, books, fees) is \$30 per month or \$360 per year. Four scholars chosen by a panel of community members in Santo Tomás received scholarships beginning in January 2010. Five more scholars were added to the program last year. This spring, a third group of students will begin their studies with scholarship support. Below, edited and translated, are biographical notes sent by some of these 13 students. We welcome and need financial support to continue providing the life-changing opportunity offered by university scholarships.

Ericka Yessenia Argüello Sequeira

I am 37 years old and just starting my second year of studying nursing. In addition to my studies, I work in the café of the People's Clinic from 8 in the morning until 3 in the afternoon. Prior to receiving this scholarship, I dedicated my life to work and to my children, but I always held out hope that one day I would have the chance to pursue my education. I don't want to just settle. I want to give my children a better life and set a good example of how to live.

Because of this scholarship, I have had the opportunity

to persist in my studies even while juggling the difficulties of work and family, arranging my time to be able to do projects in the field, going straight from work to studying, and finding money to pay for internet research and photocopies for class. There are so many costs, such as the full nursing uniform that we need to have next month when we start our practicum work. I want to say thank you to the scholarship donors for the opportunity you have given me.

Even though I don't have the highest grades, I know that with all I have studied and thought about in my schooling, I can



Ericka

make a positive contribution and be a good future professional. Theory is important, but it's practice that really makes the expert. I know that I will gain much valuable experience in future courses. I hope to find a good job after graduating, where I can apply my knowledge in my vocation. I enjoy my field and look forward to being the best professional I possibly can. I enjoying serving others and being able to support

Continued on page 6

With love, from Santo Tomás

All about our *amistad*—the Olympia/Santo Tomás sister connection: right, two women workers at the *comedor* (lunch program) heft a pot of beans from the fire; below, Grace helps do dishes after lunch with some women workers.



Above: Seano with well-fed kids and friends at the *comedor infantil*; below, left, welcome celebration for 2011 Evergreen student group in Santo Tomás; right, young summer delegates Whitney and Cliff help at a work party at a small community center in the countryside.



something good for society, for my family, and for my community.

Aminta Danelia Rocha

I'm 19 years old, studying nursing, and specializing in community health. When I was a child, my siblings and I lived with our mother and grandmother. I never knew my father. I went to elementary school at Rubén Darío (editors' note: this is the sister school of Lincoln Elementary in Olympia). As a child, I attended the Children's Free Lunch Kitchen for meals, one of several projects of the CDC to help the poorest people in Santo Tomás.

I go to school on Saturdays and work Monday through Friday, doing cleaning and housekeeping for a sweet old married couple just two blocks from my home. They treat me well and value my presence. I work about five hours each day, and spend the rest of my time doing homework and taking care of my younger siblings. I am also part of the Red Cross, which is where my love for helping others was born.

I want to be someone in life. I have seen poverty and lived it in my own flesh. I have believed ever since I was a child that my life is worth something, and that I don't deserve to live like this. My philosophy has been that I should fight, and in fighting, show that being poor does not equate to being a failure. My dream is to be a nurse. I want to help my family with making ends meet at home and offer my professional services to people who most need them.

My studies are fascinating to me and my grades are good. During this first year, I have enjoyed going to trainings in other communities and getting to know my colleagues. I loved learning how to give injections! I most enjoy studying anatomy and physiology. I have gotten to know how our bodies are structured and how they function. The body is marvelous; all the modern technology in the world can never imitate or understand exactly how it works. My current needs include purchasing materials for my classes, such as a stethoscope, uniform and the travel costs to get to training in other cities. The handouts for classes are expensive, but I try to borrow them or get together to study them with friends in order to keep the costs down.



Aminta

and housekeeping for a sweet old married couple just two blocks from my home. They treat me well and value my presence. I work about five hours each day, and spend the rest of my time doing homework and taking care of my younger siblings. I am also part



This scholarship is an opportunity that I deeply value. It has opened doors for me personally, increased my desire to keep fighting, and made me commit myself to demonstrate that anything is possible despite being poor. It doesn't matter what circumstances you find yourself in, if you know who you are and you are sure of yourself and your purpose and your own knowledge. Thank you for having such a large heart. Few organizations look out for and create opportunities for young people. I send warm wishes to all of you who made this possible.

Meyling Marlieth González González

I am 18 years old, and just starting my second year of studying pharmacy. I live with my parents and siblings. There are four of us children in my family, which makes it rather difficult for my parents to make ends meet. Prior to starting at the university, I spent my time at home helping my mother with household duties however I could.

I have been a member of the CDC youth organization for four years. Being involved in this organization has allowed me to feel that we can all add our one little grain of sand in support of others, as the projects of the CDC are primarily social projects. My involvement with the CDC youth organization and as a scholarship recipient make me feel supported.

University studies are very expensive. Thanks to your help I have an opportunity that I have longed for. I go to school in Managua, where I stay with my aunt and help her with expenses. I am thrilled with my studies, although the assignments and exams are sometimes a little overwhelming because of the number of assignments and exams. Chemistry is the class that most interests me, as it has to do with everything that surrounds us. I am doing well in my classes; truthfully, I pretty much live and breathe my studies. I give it my best.

It is a bit difficult to be so far away from my family and my home and sometimes I have to stay up very late to study. But nothing in life is easy, and the things that require the most work are the ones that are worth the most, too. My vision is to work in



Meyling

Continued on next page

10th Delegation from Santo Tomás, Nicaragua April 10th–May 3rd

CALENDAR OF EVENTS

Please come help us welcome our visitors and raise funds at these public events!

Contact email address TSTSCA@gmail.com with inquiries

¡BIENVENIDA!

April 17th at 9:15 AM,
Lincoln Elementary Gym

213 21st Ave SE, Olympia. Personally greet our visitors from Nicaragua! We will be giving an early-morning welcome by kick starting this education-focused delegation at the gym of Lincoln Elementary School.

BAILE FOLKLÓRICO: NICARAGUAN TRADITIONS, OLYMPIA RENDITIONS

April 24th at 9:15 AM,
Lincoln Elementary Gym

213 21st Ave SE, Olympia. Watch a dance performance crafted by Lincoln students and our delegates. The students will be dancing *Baile Folklórico*, traditional Nicaraguan dance, in the Lincoln gym during the school's morning assembly.

TRADITIONAL COOKING WORKSHOP

April 28th, 10AM-1PM, Woman's Club

1002 Washington St. SE, Olympia. Prices: Sliding scale of \$5-10 Learn to cook cuisine from the typical tomasino palate: *Gallopinto* (a delicious Nicaraguan take on rice and beans), *Maduros* (fried bananas), and from-scratch *tortillas*. Please RSVP via e-mail or call Maddy Stephens at 651-261-2144.

BAILE DE DOS PUEBLOS: DANCE OF TWO TOWNS

April 28th, 7:30 PM,
Woman's Club

1002 Washington St. SE, Olympia. Prices: Sliding scale of \$5-10 Come for dance lessons from our visitors at the Woman's Club! Delegates will be workshopping oldschool Nicaraguan dance moves. Help us punctuate this delegation by shaking it with our friends out on the dance floor! Family friendly event, with a no host bar and light food available for purchase.



Mt. Rainier Sunday, April 22

Come with us (weather permitting) for a day of snow and sledding! This will be the first time our visitors have walked in a winter wonderland. In case of bad weather we will move this excursion to April 29th. RSVP via email or contact Maureen Hill at 360-786-9505.

DESPEDIDA/FAREWELL POTLUCK

May 2nd at 6:00 PM,
Lincoln Elementary Cafeteria

213 21st Ave SE, Olympia. Help us say hasta pronto, or "see you soon" to our delegates and send them off with an Olympia-style potluck. Bring your appetite and a favorite dish to share!

Scholars

From previous page

the creation of medicine. I want to be able to support my parents who have sacrificed so much. I want to feel fully realized as a person and be able to assist people who are most in need of my help. It would be best if I had an opportunity to make medications, or to work in a pharmacy, near Santo Tomás. Right now it's quite difficult to find a job, but I won't be defeated and will

fight for what I want, whatever it costs. If an opportunity presents itself to continue my studies by pursuing a masters, post-graduate, or doctorate degree, I will work to achieve that goal. I feel immensely grateful for the unconditional support that you have provided to me and the other young scholars. It inspires me to know that there are people like you who want to support a future for young professionals.

To support this critical scholarship program, please email tstca@gmail.com

**Thurston–Santo Tomás
Sister County Association**

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April 10 to May 3
**Delegation from
Santo Tomás**
Meet the two visiting
teachers from Lincoln's
sister school in Nicaragua!

Inside:
Spring delegation coming to olympia
Scholarship recipients
More pictures!



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TSTSCA meetings are generally on the 2nd 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.