

# Olympia/Santo Tomás Update

**US/Nicaragua Solidarity—Since 1989**

**December 2016**

An update  
from the  
Thurston–Santo Tomás  
Sister County  
Association

## **Cristhian Alexis Lazo Vásquez, 19 years old, super scholar!**

I am studying to become a civil engineer and am in my second year at the National University of Engineering in Juigalpa, Chontales. This is a five year, weekend intensive program. I live with my family in the comarca El Alto, a rural community outside of Santo Tomás. We are farmers and my parents bring their products to the town's Mercado Campesino every week, which is where they heard about the possibility of this scholarship. I applied and am grateful to have been awarded this monthly funding for my undergraduate studies. Though my parents have encouraged me to keep going forward with my education, I now work 11 hour days in a pulperia (small store) to augment our income. Of course, this competes with time I need for my heavy



load of homework. I have only evenings to dedicate to my studies and am in great need of a laptop and internet access, as well as time.

My motivation to keep studying comes from a deep desire to improve myself, to someday serve my people, my community, and my family. I want to help us get ahead and have a better quality of life.

I thank you for the unconditional support you provide for my tuition and travel expenses to and from the university. I hope that more youth with dreams of bettering themselves and our country can also receive this opportunity. *This is our best way forward.*

## **Scholarships Clear Pathways to Higher Education in Nicaragua**

In Fall 2009, TSTSCA initiated a five year college scholarship commitment to Santo Tomás as a priority request from the Committee for Community Development. There was a time in Nicaragua, before the overthrow of the US supported Somoza family dictatorship in 1979 when the illiteracy rate was 57%, according of the United Nations Development Program. Public education became one of the significant advances of the Sandinista revolution in the 80s and it is once again a priority. However, higher education is out of reach for most Nicaraguans due to the cost and difficulty obtaining any kind of loan, let alone grants. The cost to minimally support one university student (tuition, books, fees) is \$40 per month or \$480 per year. The undergraduate programs are five years in duration and some Tomásinos/as study at a national university branch about an hour away by bus. Four initial scholars were chosen by a panel of community members in Santo Tomás to receive scholarships beginning in January 2010. Each year, more Tomásinas/os have

applied and been awarded funds. At this point, nine students have graduated, another seven will complete their studies in 2017, and we have recently committed to supporting another seven students. In each of our biannual newsletters, we publish a mini-bio of a scholarship recipient. We hope to start receiving success stories from these graduates to share with you in future newsletters.

We need financial support to continue providing the life-changing opportunity offered by these college scholarships. The impact of higher ed. graduates on building the progress of Nicaragua is huge. As Cristhian mentions above: *This is our best way forward.*

Please respond as generously as you can to the fundraising letter that accompanies this newsletter. By investing in the youth in our sister town of Santo Tomás, we begin, in a very modest way, to redress the many interventions of our government on the sovereign nation of Nicaragua.

## Sean Izzarone sat down with the last Delegation from Santo Tomás to hear about their experiences in Olympia. Here are some excerpts.

Our eleventh delegation from Santo Tomás arrived in time to enjoy the Spring Artswalk in Olympia and Procession of the Species. The four members represented education and health in Nicaragua and kept a busy schedule meeting, connecting, observing, performing and giving their perspectives on numerous issues. They enjoyed their host families and the warm welcome they received everywhere they went. Sean Izzarone was a member of the 2001 student delegation from Evergreen to Santo Tomás and now lives there with his growing family. He invited the returning delegation to share their experiences and feedback with us. We now share some highlights with you.

**Thelma Castillo**, librarian at Lincoln Elementary's sister school Rubén Darío: I have been able to share videos and photos with the students at Rubén Darío, being able to thus explain the lifestyle, culture, food, etc. that I experienced in Olympia. These conversations are constant. I have a photo album available for the students and

this motivates them to ask questions and learn. Also, I have developed friendships with folks in Olympia and we keep in touch.



**Aminta Rocha**, who just completed the scholarship program and is now employed fulltime as a nurse: I fell in love with St. Peter's Hospital in Olympia in the short time I was there and the sharing of experiences across the board was very helpful for me. I also enjoyed developing a friendship with nurse Jacobo (Jacob KostECKa, Evergreen student delegation of 1998). I was also greatly impacted by learning about the lives of Latinos in Olympia. The visit to Evergreen Elementary in Shelton was also eye-opening and I was able to learn how difficult it is to get ahead for Latino families.

**César Castillo**, a rural elementary school teacher: Through this delegation I was able to get a good sense of the hermanamiento. It has motivated me to get involved in the sister county relationship due to

*Continued on next page*

### What we do...

#### Projects in Santo Tomás

TSTSCA, an all-volunteer non-profit org. in Olympia, WA works with a sister 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:** Public 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 150 people from the Olympia area have personally visited Santo Tomás. We have also supported and welcomed eleven delegations of 35 *Tomásinos/as* to learn, educate, and build mutually supportive friendships in the Olympia area. For more information, see our website at <http://www.oly-wa.us/tstsc/> or email [tstsc@gmail.com](mailto:tstsc@gmail.com)

the mutual support that exists between Olympia and Santo Tomás. Since coming back to Nicaragua I have been able to talk to lots of friends and colleagues about my trip and share my experience. For example, the lifestyle, the family structure and how it operates, etc. In my job, I have been able to share with colleagues



the methodology and teaching methods I saw employed at Lincoln and in other schools we visited, how they are able to use technology

in the school, and also how the personnel and families are organized to create a better learning environment for the students.

*Yuri Alfaro*, current CDC president, Coordinator of the Scholarship program and an accountant at a health clinic: I had the satisfaction of clearing up a number of things with TSTSCA, for example how TSTSCA and the CDC operate and clearing up any doubts that may exist about how the two organizations function. Also, I was able to meet and share with the professors at TESC which will help tremendously to better support Evergreen student delegations in the future. And of course I was able to deepen existing friendships (from my first visit to Olympia in 2002 and with the people who have visited my small city over the years) as well as make new friends.

*All:* We would have liked to have more time dedicated to hanging out exclusively with our host families... maybe one day a week? We never really had a chance to go do something with our host families and that would have been nice.

*All:* Sharing details about our lives and our culture is very important, but sometimes it can be SO draining. This is important for our hosts to remember. It is also important that we remain conscious of this fact and help to support each other.

*All:* We were so impressed with how nice and generous everyone we encountered was.

Personal comment from *César*: I loved going to yoga but it was SO HOT!!!!

And from *Aminta*: I felt free to DANCE!!

The four delegates present expressed repeatedly, both during the evaluation and in previous conversations on an individual basis, just how pleased with this delegation that they are and that they consider it a big success. This positive view of the delegation was given both for their own performance as well as that of TSTSCA and all the other folks in Olympia who contributed their time and effort to the success of this delegation. On that note, I would like to thank all involved as well for a wonderful and worthwhile effort – I am so glad to see that all that work translated into a positive experience for all parties. Thanks as well for including me in your efforts and trusting me with help in the preparations.

*Sean Izzarone, your humble servant*



*Thelma and Yuri silkcreening our logo at the Olympia-Rafah Mural during Artswalk "Juntos Somos un Volcán" Together we are a volcano— Olympia ■ Santo Tomás ■ Mol Solidarity*

## Yuri and the Strauss family

Our family had the pleasure of hosting Yuri Alfaro López during the Santo Tomás delegation visit last Spring. Our involvement with TSTSCA had been very limited before that time and now we are hooked. A trip to Nicaragua can't come soon enough for us!

Having Yuri here was such a treat. We only wish we'd had more time with her! She and the other delegates worked hard while they were here and were very busy. They visited lots of organizations, went to public schools, The Evergreen State College, performed at public events and so much more.

Probably the most meaningful part of Yuri's visit for me was talking with her about her life and being reminded of how fortunate we are here in Olympia. We have a home, quality school for our kids, plenty of food to eat and good medical care. It became clear to me that Yuri always works hard. She has two young children and yet works 6 days a week as an accountant in the Clínica Popular. Part of her CDC volunteer work is connected with TSTSCA through running the college scholarship program that has been such a huge support to her local community. She is a leader in Santo Tomás and I feel so lucky that we now call her a friend. While here, she worked non-stop to get the word out about the organization and to raise money to support the scholarship program and the other projects of the CDC.

Another treat of Yuri's visit was getting to know the other delegates. Aminta was staying nearby and visited with us on occasion. One evening Yuri and Aminta combined efforts to cook us a typical Nicaraguan meal – *gallo pinto*. They laughed with us as we compared different ways of doing things in

the kitchen. They pulled out a Nicaraguan music CD and played it while we cooked. Certainly they were homesick for their families but so dedicated to their work here. We also got to know César, the youngest delegate, who at 19 teaches in a one-room school house in a rural area outside of Santo Tomás. He showed us pictures of his school and shared stories of his students. He and our son enjoyed watching anime shows together and we loved having him around, almost like another son.

I could continue but will now let the rest of my family chime in...

*Kathy Strauss*



*Ansel, Aurora, Laurence, Kathy and Yuri*

### My husband Laurence:

What was most memorable for me was sitting at our dining room table with Yuri engaging in meaningful conversation with my very rudimentary Spanish. Yuri was totally unfazed as I butchered her language, made wild hand gestures and invented nonexistent words on the fly. I think she appreciated my perseverance and I appreciated her patience. Through it all, we had some great conversations, and I learned a lot about her and her life in Nicaragua.

### Aurora, 16:

I am so thankful we had the opportunity of hosting Yuri. She is such a nice person and she worked so hard in Olympia to educate people about TSTSCA. It was so great to be able to practice my Spanish and although my Spanish is very limited, I enjoyed talking to a native speaker. It is very eye-opening to be able to learn about different cultures and Yuri was able to tell us about Nicaragua. This was a great experience and I hope others in Olympia are able to get involved with TSTSCA.

### Ansel, 12:

I liked having Yuri here because I got to meet a lot of new people and to learn some Spanish. I learned how to offer her food: "*Quieres fruta?*" Also, Yuri really liked our dog, Penny, who often barks at strangers, especially men. Yuri says Penny is a feminist!



*Yuri with Dalva Perez, member of the Spring 2001 Evergreen Student Delegation to Santo Tomás*



*Yuri reuniting with Alex Becker, who stayed in her family home when he was a member of the Spring 2011 Evergreen Student Delegation.*

## Fostering our Sister School Connection

For many years, Lincoln Options Elementary School in Olympia has had the good fortune to have a sister-school relationship with Escuela Rubén Darío in Santo Tomás. The Lincoln students have often expressed pride that their community helps provide material aid to Rubén Darío each year, such as school supplies for the kids and a projector to enable classroom presentations. Recently, Lincoln students were asked to describe the gifts that this sister-school connection has brought back into their lives in return. On this page you can see some of their responses. Their answers clearly reflect the fact that the Spring delegation visit from Santo Tomás brought a deeper, more tangible meaning to their sister-school relationship. Thelma Castillo, the librarian at Rubén Darío, spent much of her time in Olympia in the classrooms at Lincoln. Every student was able to interact with her, both during their dedicated Spanish instruction time, and during other parts of their school day, and many were able to interact with César as well. Many students also came with their families to a Spanish Activity Night while

the delegates were in town -- we first watched Thelma and César dance, and then we stumbled and laughed as they tried to teach us some basic Baile Folklor steps! Through these experiences, Lincoln students were able to make new friends in Thelma and César, and for many of our students- to communicate in a different language and to see examples of a culture distant from their own. For our students of Latin American heritage, it may have been validating and inspiring. And having this increased depth of connection with real people from Santo Tomás brings the Lincoln students even more excitement about communicating with their sister-classes at Rubén Darío. Lincoln students have completed group letters to each sister class that will be sent to Rubén Darío shortly, and they will soon start working on individual autobiographical booklets, in Spanish, that will be ready to deliver to Rubén Darío sometime next Spring. We owe Thelma and César (and Yuri and Amilta too) a tremendous Gracias! for connecting with the Lincoln community so brilliantly!

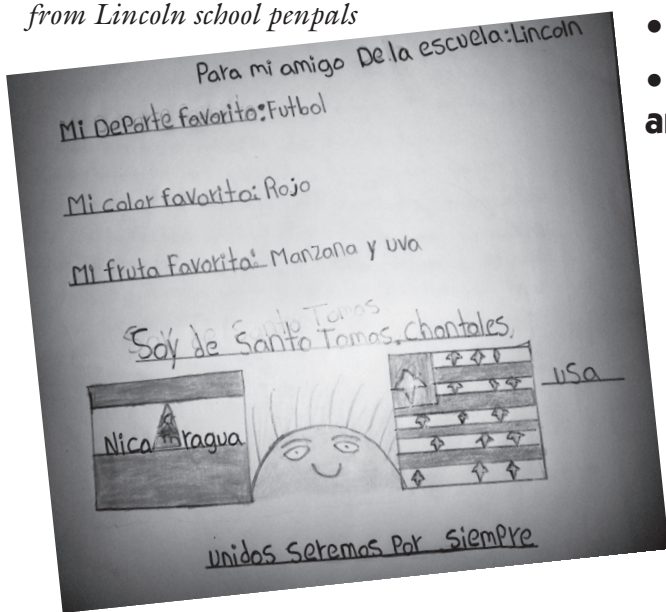
*Heather McLeod, Lincoln parent*



*Students at Rubén Darío holding up letters from Lincoln school penpals*

### Lincoln students: "what our relationship with Ruben Darío brings to us"

- a chance to meet people
- a chance to learn about another culture
- it feels good to share with others
- an opportunity to travel to visit another culture
- a great learning experience
- we get letters from pen pals
- we get a chance to communicate in another language



*Tim, Heather, and Zoe McLeod hosted Thelma Castillo in their home while she was visiting Lincoln School for three weeks.*



## Olympia's solidarity with Cuba and "friendshipment" remembered with Fidel's death

Commandante Fidel Alejandro Castro Ruz

*By songwriter and performer David Rovics*

When we look at history and how it's all unwound  
There are few people on the planet that have been  
more tightly bound

With the liberation of our troubled human race  
Than the man from Santiago with the beard upon his  
face

Dressed in green fatigues that he wore most of his  
years

As he led his country longer than any of his peers  
And few men have been vilified more often in the news  
Than Commandante Fidel Alejandro Castro Ruz

Born into a country of Dengue and despair  
Ruled by foreign armies ever since Columbus got  
there

He'd reject his privilege and join humanity  
Forced to choose between his species and his family  
And when legal means had failed to stop the suffering  
he saw

He decided it was high time to work outside the law  
He organized a revolution with the rifle and the fuse  
Commandante Fidel Alejandro Castro Ruz

*These are the first 2 of 5 verses written by Rovics to  
honor Fidel after his death.*

## Nicaragua: Daniel Ortega storms to landslide victory

*aljazeera.com Nov. 7, 2016*

Nicaraguan President Daniel Ortega has overwhelmingly won re-election to a third consecutive term.

Ortega, 71, ran with his wife, Rosario Murillo, as his vice-presidential candidate in a race that pitted him against five lesser-known candidates after court rulings weakened the opposition.

The Reuters news agency reported on Monday that Ortega secured 72.1 percent of votes citing Nicaragua's Supreme Electoral Council.

The announcement sent hundreds of Ortega's Sandinista National Liberation Front party supporters out into the streets of the capital to celebrate.

The opposition, which had urged people to boycott the election, disputed that claim, contending "more than 70 percent" of voters did not cast ballots. *They were contradicted by the electoral authorities which put voter participation at 65.8% (BBC, Nov. 7 2016)*

*The fact remains, though, that he was the most popular candidate by far.*



*Olympian Rick Fellows, shaking hands with Fidel Castro in 2004, has served as mechanic for Pastors for Peace caravans since the first caravan to Nicaragua in 1988. Over the years, these caravans extended to El Salvador, Guatemala, Cuba and Chiapas. Cuba "Friendshipment" caravans began in 1992 and in July 2016 they carried out the 27th.*



*Overseeing Nicaragua's stable economic growth and the lack of violence compared to the problems of its neighbors El Salvador and Honduras in recent years have cemented him as the best option for many Nicaraguans. Nicaragua's economy has grown at double the Latin American average, but the country still needs to attract more foreign investment. (BBC, Nov. 7 2016)*

However, Ortega will face an increasingly difficult regional landscape in his new term.

Leftist ally Venezuela is overwhelmed by an economic crisis and Cuba is normalizing relations with the United States.

The US Congress is also working on legislation to require the US government to oppose loans to Nicaragua from international lending institutions.

"The lack of Venezuelan support, the international price of oil, the price of our exports, and the possibility that [US legislation passes] make it a more complicated outlook for Ortega in the next term," Oscar Rene Vargas, a sociologist and economist at Central American University, told AFP news agency.

## Question posed to friends in Nicaragua: What are your reactions to the results of the elections? What concerns or hopes do you have?

*Facunda Zeledón, vice mayor of Santo Tomás*

Hello friends, we continue ahead in the struggle aspiring to a better world and, with everyone's support, we will prevail. We have to remain full of hope because nothing will come easily. Greetings to all friends in Olympia! I send hugs!

*Eugenio Morales, city architect/engineer*

“For us, the U.S. has always been more of a threat than an ally and now with the political rhetoric of Donald Trump we are waiting to see what will come next. If he really doesn't like immigrants then he should support the countries of Central America. Instead, he is promoting laws that will impede our economic growth because he disagrees with our development models. I don't understand how (the U.S) doesn't want to accept immigrants but they do everything they can to oppress us economically, causing crises that make emigrating necessary. It has always been this way but we hope for change. We want to work in our country, without economic intervention. UNITY and LIBERTY.”

*Yuri Alfaro López, CDC president and clinic accountant*

“Our country's greatest hope is that our government succeeds in opening different markets for Nicaragua, prepares us to face the changes from the North American economy, betters our democracy, and that we continue to educate our people to have greater international competency. We hope Donald Trump and the Republicans will not follow through on his threats because they would hurt the entire world's economy, including the U.S. Those living outside the U.S. are not the only ones under threat, people living inside the country are under an even greater threat economically, racially and psychologically. My personal hope is that the people of the U.S. will have their own revolution against a system that is already in decline and at

last create a government by and for the people. This is the only way the rest of humanity can breathe easy. Those living inside the system have the greatest ability to make change.”

*Thelma Castillo, school librarian*

We think the sister relationships will always continue because we are an organization full of faith and hope that all will be better. All obstacles will fall because our union makes us strong.

*Modesto Narváez, Retired city employee and past Regional Coordinator of Sandinista Youth, in response to the recent Nicaraguan elections*

The *Frente Sandinista para la Liberación Nacional* has won the election by a large margin, We will now have another period under Commandante Daniel Ortega and his wife as Vice President. It's important to point out that the FSLN must work to improve relations with rural areas where they have not yet found a way to establish themselves. Perhaps they should reconsider their social projects and revise what it is that people really need. For example, more roads can be built to improve transportation of people and their products to markets, or the number of sports programs for youth can be increased and diversified. These are little things but even so, there is a need for the FSLN to be more involved at a municipal level and include local leaders when developing socially beneficial projects. The last elections failed to include local leaders in their decisions on development. Work must be done so that leadership positions are not given as political favors and are instead given to candidates with the capacity to lead efficiently and transparently. It is necessary to have a reconciliatory government that takes all the different social sectors into account, instead of politically and legally suppressing opposition groups. There is much to be done in our small country. Nicaragua will keep developing itself slowly.”



**Thurston–Santo Tomás  
Sister County Association**

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**See inside:**

Meet Scholar Cristhian  
Lazo

Spring '16 delegation  
from Santo Tomás

Lincoln School's  
penpals

Elections in  
Nicaragua and the US

Solidarity with Cuba

## **Fantastic Annual Rummage Sale - Saturday, January 28th: Beat the Winter Blues!**

The Thurston-Santo Tomas Sister County Association will raise funds, once again, for college scholarship recipients, the small library and a children's free lunch program in our sister town in Nicaragua.

Our big (and we mean big) annual rummage sale will be on Saturday, Jan. 28, 2017 from 9:00 am till 2:00 pm at the Lincoln Elementary School gymnasium, located at Washington St. SE and 21st Ave SE. You can help in the following ways.

- Bring your donations to the Lincoln gym on Friday, Jan. 27, between 4:00-7:00 pm. We are looking for all kinds of good stuff –art, jewelry, collectables, books, music, kitchen and household items, clean linens and blankets, working electronics, tools, ready to ride bikes, games, toys, knick-knacks, crafts, sporting and camping goods, awesome yard and garden stuff, nice wood furniture, and other treasures (please, no large appliances, couches, overstuffed chairs). Tell your friends, family and co-workers! No doubt they all have treasures to donate as well! They'll admire your insight when you suggest they bring their good stuff to Lincoln on that Friday 1/27.
- Come shopping on Saturday at 9am! Bring a friend. There is sure to be something just right for you.
- Volunteer to help with the sale. Call or text (360) 464-5264 or e-mail [tstsca@gmail.com](mailto:tstsca@gmail.com) and our volunteer coordinator will find a shift to suit your schedule. We will need volunteers on Friday to help set up, on Saturday to help staff the sale (especially the early shift), and a small crew to come in at the end to clean-up.
- Help advertise the sale. Tell folks you know, put it on your facebook page, tweet it, hang up a few posters, put an announcement in your favorite newsletter, start a TSTSCA flash mob...You are creative – please think of some way to get the word out!