

Olympia/Santo Tomás Update

US/Nicaragua Solidarity—Since 1989

Fall 2017

An update
from the
Thurston—Santo Tomás
Sister County
Association

This scholar will serve her community

Three years ago, I learned about this Olympia/CDC scholarship opportunity from a local radio announcement and a local TV broadcast. I investigated the requirements, applied, and was selected. I've been really busy ever since!

My name is Yerlin Anielka Matus Lacayo. I'm 22 now and in my third of a five year Public Accounting and Auditing degree. It's a weekend intensive program, which allows me to be a nanny and care for a wonderful little girl on weekdays. Her working parents appreciate my support and are as excited as my parents, with whom I live, that I am immersed in university studies and doing very well. My largest obstacle in my struggle to succeed has been the country's economy, which has affected my family and many more families in my town and everywhere. From our trust in God and our ability to not give up easily, my family has overcome every hurdle by embracing this *dicho*: falling is optional but getting back up is an obligation. We live by this saying.

Another big challenge is finding the time to get my homework done. I work as a nanny, do homework, attend classes, do more homework, wash my clothes by hand and



Yerlin Anielka Matus Lacayo

help with the housework. Sleep is in short supply. This is literally my whole life right now.

My motivation to study and work hard, and to make these sacrifices, comes from my commitment to a better quality of life for me, my family and my community. I pursued education non-stop until I began college and couldn't afford to continue. It was hard to hit that wall and have to stop. My family shares my value of aspiring to a career but doesn't have the economic possibility to cover the extra expenses. This scholarship has been a bridge to my being able to reach my dreams.

Through this scholarship, I have made important new friendships with classmates and the other Olympia-supported scholars. The scholarship students and I get together at least once a month to plan

activities and carry out social work projects in our community, deepening our commitment to Santo Tomás.

When I graduate in two more years, you will find me serving my community of Santo Tomás with professionalism. I will feel triumphant as I look back on your generous support, my sacrifices and steps forward, and all of my life's experiences.

Falling is optional but getting back up is an obligation. We live by this saying.

Support for the Scholars! Several years ago, the Thurston-Santo Tomás Sister County Association committed to providing modest college scholarships to students in our sister community in Nicaragua who would otherwise be unable to pursue and complete university studies. The volunteer project coordinators select students who are committed to serving in their community after they graduate and become professionals. For \$40 per month, you can make a huge difference in a student's life and contribute to strengthening Santo Tomás. Please send your donation and the return form from the back of the accompanying letter to TSTSCA PO Box 561 Olympia WA 98507. More info: tstsc@gmail.com or call (360) 943-8642.

George Hartwell ¡Presente! ¡Presente! ¡Presente! 1944-2017

by Jean Eberhardt

I was in Nicaragua with George (and 12 other people from the Olympia Construction Brigade) almost 30 years ago, during the contra war. It was a very hard time with a lot of misery and death at hand. It was

also a time of great possibilities and joy, of creating a new country, and we were witness to the transformation. George, and fellow brigade member Donn Hewes, stayed with the family of Doña Aurora Báez Bravo, who later visited Olympia in 1996 on the 2nd delegation from Santo Tomás. Our time there was a profound experience for all of us, a close look, if you will, at US foreign

policy in action. We worked alongside Nicaraguans digging trenches, tying steel rebar, mixing up concrete by hand on the ground and laying up block walls to build a two-story center for a women's sewing school and cooperative. We were told that our choosing to be there, accompanying Nicaraguans in dangerous times, was meaningful and appreciated. This was a gesture of solidarity from US citizens in a time of war, a trade embargo and a disinformation campaign mounted by the CIA.

George was one of three parents in that group. I'm certain the parents felt the danger we were in much more acutely because they had kids back home. George leapt for cover when machine guns fired in the near distance. A simple wooden cross next to the construction site marked where a local man was shot down when the contra overran Santo Tomás three months before our arrival. We all went home as scheduled; definitely

changed by what we saw, felt and learned, but intact. George returned to his family and his work with Child Protective Services, where he pursued social justice for children. He watched the TSTSCA emerge and commit to a long-term relationship with Santo Tomás, and was pleased to see Tomásinos and Tomásinas begin the exchange visits with their sister county.

Six years ago, George came up with the idea to support the college scholarships project (see interview with Yerlin Matus Lacayo) by hosting a plant sale

fundraiser in front of my house on the westside of Olympia. He enjoyed potting up a few new perennials every day for the couple of months leading up to the sale. George was our plant expert and generous with his time and enthusiasm. There are

currently 14 young people from Santo Tomás going to college who would otherwise not be there. They will help their country move forward. These modest scholarships mean the world to them and meant a lot to George. **Please honor George and his creative vision, and these students, by supporting our annual plant sale on Saturday, May 5th, 2018.** Save the date and pot up some of your plants for scholarships!

George died on September 28th; his obituary was published in *The Olympian* on 10/28/17.



Initial phase of construction for the Casa de Costura in 1988. George Hartwell is standing second from left, with most of the crew from Olympia and two of the Nicaraguan masons. This center (at right) is now serving women with more programs such as counseling and legal support.



“The Soul of the Sisterhood”

Wyatt Warner, spring 2017 Evergreen Student Delegation

The Comedor Infantil is a project that provides a free lunch to children in need, but it's also a space for childhood. Every weekday morning and early afternoon there are kids playing soccer or baseball in the patio, coloring or reading in the library, working on their homework, or just spending time with other children and the friendly comedor staff.

The comedor serves a little over a hundred young people, mostly kids from the ages one to 10. Others that it serves (through take-out) include people with different capacities including those with Down's syndrome, and some of the nurses from the CDC's People's Clinic.

The project was born in the early eighties, shortly after the Sandinista triumph, when a beloved Colombian priest, Padre Ignacio González (1990 delegation to Olympia), proposed the idea to a women's group who were searching for a way to meet the needs of their community. In its early days, the comedor served three meals a day to 350 children, with many of the resources coming directly from the Sandinista government. During the danger of the Contra war in the mid

to late eighties, the project was scaled back to provide just lunch, though a very hearty one. When the Sandinista government was voted out of power in 1990, the funds disappeared, and the sister committees in Mol, Belgium and Olympia, Washington, began to financially support the project, which they do to this day. Many of the university students who receive scholarships from Olympia were kids who grew up in the comedor, and they remember it fondly for helping them build their self-confidence as it nourished them.

Every day the comedor staff produce a giant pot of protein rich food, (almost always paired with rice) and a large quantity of a local fruit drink (imagine guava, starfruit, mango). There's also a library in a separate

wing of the building, where anyone can go to read the small but thorough selection of books. Topics range from literature to trade manuals to chemistry textbooks. This is where many of the kids who arrive early can be found, coloring in traced copies of donated coloring books and chatting with the knowledgeable librarian.

Another wing of the center is a recreation area, with games and lots of arts and crafts supplies. These are free for the children of the comedor to use, most of whom do not have access to the same resources at home. Here the comedor staff frequently stage arts and crafts activities, and every few months give free haircuts to the children.

The comedor has a few paid positions, but the rest of the work is shouldered by volunteer mothers, who cook, chop, clean, and keep the place running. Some of the oldest kids share the work of wiping down and putting the tables away at the end of the lunch hour.

Doña Aurora Baez (1996 delegation to Olympia), the first coordinator of the comedor, describes it as the “soul of the sisterhood.” The Solidarity Committee in Mol pays for most of the foodstuffs and two staff members, and the TSTSCA in Olympia pays the salaries of the coordinator and the two librarians, and occasionally books, furniture and paint for the building. The CDC's Model Farm provides some of the food.

My mornings at the comedor are some of the time that I look forward to the most here in Nicaragua. My coworkers joke around with me constantly but also teach me tons, not just how to chop veggies and serve food, but also help me with my

Spanish, my health, my feelings, and they overall provide me with strong support. The kids too are wonderful. I can no longer walk for long around Santo Tomás without a child or two yelling “adios Wyatt” as I pass by. After the midday rush is over I get a plate of good food and sit with them, to hear the stories they love to tell me or teach them words in English that they'd like to know.

Many of the university students who receive scholarships from Olympia were kids who grew up in the comedor.



La Escuela Hermandad

Stephanie Maldonado

As part of the 2017 Evergreen student delegation in Nicaragua, with the help of the sisterhood between Santo Tomás and Olympia, I chose to volunteer with the “Hermandad” project. If you’ve read the newsletters over many years, you might remember that this project was established with the collaboration of the sister city in Belgium, with the construction of the first floor of the building. Olympia later financed the addition of the second level [anyone remember Grace Cox’s 50th birthday pie auction fundraiser?]. This multi-use building now houses a pre-school, a new small public health clinic, a school for special needs kids and young adults, and technical schools for culinary arts and beauty. These programs provide community members with access to opportunities in education and health for a promising future.

I spent most of my time in the Hermandad pre-school, working with children from three to five years old. Through arts and crafts as well as the use of poetry and songs, these children learn about a proud Nicaraguan history. I learned about children becoming comfortable in developing skills under the careful tutelage of their teachers, increasing the likelihood of these students obtaining a good education later.

The Culinary Technical School in the Hermandad was

established in 2005 with two different courses: cooking and pastries. The Beauty Technical School was established shortly afterwards with different courses

for specialty certifications. With these certifications, the students find opportunities for work and sometimes they start their own businesses.

The technical schools charge very low fees in order to insure accessibility to the community. Olympia has also contributed by donating supplies for each program [can

anyone donate beauty school mannequin heads with hair?] so the students can have access to materials critical to their success in these programs. With the increase of students, the Hermandad has become known around Santo Tomás, and beyond, as a place for opportunities to obtain a quality technical education.

Luisandra Duarte Romero, a student at the beauty school, mentioned that she heard about

the class on the radio. Besides loving what she’s learning now, she said she chooses to bus in to the Hermandad from Acoyapa, 30 minutes away, due to the program reputation around Chontales and the promising economic benefits. These programs emerged directly from community needs. I hope you can see how impor-

tant it is to make sure that low-income students continue to benefit from these educational opportunities.



Friends of ATC Visits in Nicaragua, June 2017

Friends of the ATC is a solidarity network with the Asociación de Trabajadores del Campo (ATC, or Rural Workers Association), an organization of struggle that defends the rural workers and peoples of Nicaragua. We organize at local and international levels to spread awareness, form solidarity, and facilitate support for the struggles and initiatives of the ATC and the international movement La Vía Campesina. In the spirit of internationalism, we believe in the necessity of supporting ongoing struggles for justice in our own communities and around the world.

The Latin American Institute of Agroecology (IALA Mesoamerica) is an educational initiative of the rural social movements that make up La Vía Campesina (LVC). Agroecology is the application of ecological and traditional knowledge for sustainable food production. In the past 20 years, LVC and the Latin American Coordination of Rural Organizations (CLOC) have dedicated an important part of their energy towards agroecological training in order to generate and share peasant knowledge in their grassroots and graduate youth organizers with the capacity to lead the construction of food sovereignty in their countries, organizations, and communities.

June 10, 2017 blog posting of Erika Takeo:

We had the recent pleasure of meeting students of US universities who are participating in study abroad programs in Nicaragua.

In La Casona of the ATC Chontales in the city of Juigalpa, the ATC and Friends of the ATC met students from The Evergreen State College (Olympia, Washington), who spent 10 weeks living in the community of Santo Tomás through a partnership between the Thurston-Santo Tomás Sister County Association and the Comité para Desarrollo Comunal (CDC) of Santo Tomás. Our main topic of conversation was the community of Santo Tomás, where the ATC is building one of the

campuses for IALA Mesoamérica. La Vía Campesina member Werner Narváez [son of Modesto Narváez, delegate to Olympia in 2002] gave us an update on the 200-acre farm and the agricultural production that is taking place currently in small parcels. We also learned about the CDC's Children's Free Lunch program, the Clínica Popular, and the Model Farm.

We were delighted to meet with Evergreen students once again and CDC President Yuri Alfaro López, who we met in Olympia during Friends of the ATC's 2016 speaking tour on the West Coast of the United States.

Back in April and May of 2016, we completed our first-ever speaking tour: Peasant Agroecology for Food Sovereignty and Mother Earth. Over two weeks, Marlen, Erika, and Nils met hundreds of people in their classrooms, organizations, homes, farms,

and gardens to learn about responses in the States to the dominant industrial model of agriculture and dialogue about how social movements envision scaling out agroecology. We discussed the false solutions to climate change such as carbon offsets, the role of feminism in the construction of socialism, the dangers of GMOs and other corporate-controlled seeds and foods, the importance of the sovereignty of each nation including Nicaragua in organizing its food system, and the true ability of agroecology to feed our peoples.

We visited so many activists in the Bay Area, Santa Cruz, Stanford, UC Berkeley, Napa Valley, University of Oregon, OSU and up to Olympia! Throughout these visits we affirmed the importance of strengthening solidarity amongst our peoples in the common struggle against capitalism, imperialism, patriarchy, colonialism, and racism.

The clouds caught up with us as we traveled to Washington State to the town of Olympia. With Evergreen State College students from Professors Martha Rosemeyer, Carolyn Prouty and Dave Muehleisen's food systems programs, we



ATC, Evergreen, and CDC Santo Tomás together in Juigalpa, Chontales, on June 3rd 2017



Continued on next page

Sustaining Our Connections in 2018: Delegations from Santo Tomás to Olympia

The long tradition of welcoming friends from Santo Tomás into our community for several weeks every other spring may continue in 2018. Plans for a delegation northbound are being considered, fueled in good part by the energy and enthusiasm of several Evergreen students eager to return the “amistad” and “buena voluntad” extended to them during their 3-month stay in Nicaragua this past year. If we decide to leap into organizing our 12th delegation from S.T., we’ll anticipate a whirlwind of activity for our guests including Procession of the Species, visits with local schools and colleges, community service organizations, a trip to Seattle and Mt. Rainier. We would also host several public events to introduce our visitors to the good people of Olympia. Securing visas for the Nicaraguans may be much more challenging under our country’s current administration, so let’s see what’s possible.

If you are interested in helping, there will be lots of opportunities:

- ✓ You can offer to be a Spanish speaking host family
- ✓ You can offer to provide interpretation services
- ✓ You can volunteer to prepare and serve food at one of the public events
- ✓ You can offer to provide transportation
- ✓ You can join us for any and all of the fun and help ensure that our guests have a powerful exchange as well as a wonderful time!

juntos somos un volcán



**Olympia ▲ Santo Tomás ▲ Mol
¡Solidaridad!**

Stay tuned for more details about a possible Spring Delegation North as the planning exploration unfolds. If not next year, then some other one. Please don’t hesitate to get in touch with us if you want to get involved! Email us with your great ideas for local and nearby activities and let us know how you’d like to plug in: tstca@gmail.com.

ATC

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had a full morning lesson at the Evergreen Farm which included a small *mística*, a presentation from visiting Nicaraguans through the Thurston-Santo Tomás Sister County Association, and one of the most delicious potlucks of our lives. We also meant with students of the Farmworker Justice Collective, who organize with the Driscolls Berries boycott and Familias Unidas Por La Justicia, in support of strawberry workers’ demands for a unionization vote at Sakuma Brothers Berry Farm.

Also in Olympia, Russ Fox (former Evergreen professor and founding member of the South of the Sound Community Farm Land Trust) worked hard to arrange for us two visits with organizations that have created innovative models for building food sovereignty. These included a visit to GRuB, a youth education and farming organization that has become a leader in youth-led movements for food justice in the United States, and a visit to the South of the Sound Community Farm Land Trust, which supports transitions to land that are focused on growing food for

local communities in perpetuity.

We immensely enjoyed sharing the ATC and Via Campesina’s visions for food sovereignty and agroecology during this speaking tour. We connected with more people that we could have imagined who are envisioning alternatives to the extractivist model of neoliberal capitalism through agroecology training programs, political organizing, worker unions, land trusts, and more. To all those who did the leg work of coordinating our visits (of which there are too many to mention), who showed us hospitality, and who we met during these two weeks, thank you for your kindness and expressions of solidarity.

Saludos,

Erika Takeo, Friends of the ATC

Marlen Sanchez, ATC National Coordinator of Agroecology

Nils McCune, ATC agroecology technical team

Climate Change and Hurricanes

Santo Tomás has been hit by the same recent tropical storms and hurricanes that have done almost apocalyptic damage to Puerto Rico and other Caribbean islands. We all saw images of deeply flooded streets and highways, homes, cars and survivors in Texas and Florida. Resilient community organizations and FEMA kicked into gear and now Olympians don't hear much about how affected people in those two states are faring. We are left to believe that progress is happening. On the other hand Puerto Rico, which is a US territory with US citizens, is faring quite differently. Most of these US citizens still do not yet have electricity or potable water after Hurricane Maria laid waste to the island's weak infrastructure on September 20th. There is a lot to unpack and examine here, from the legacy of colonial neglect and racism, to the disproportionate damage to the global south from climate change and the

catastrophic warming of the oceans on our planet.

In Santo Tomás, torrential rains, high winds and flooding in the last super storm brought down almost half of the town's trees. Roads and bridges have been washed out. Thelma Castillo, who visited Olympia in 2016, was at Ruben Dario (Lincoln's sister school), walking between the library and the main part of the building when a large tree blew over and came close to falling on her. She narrowly escaped being crushed. Due to the damage, school was cancelled for days. In addition to tragic drowning deaths, including a local doctor, Nicaragua has just lost its entire fall harvest and it has no FEMA. People in the tropics across the planet face increased droughts and fresh water scarcity, record storms and flooding, scorching heat waves, and hunger. What responsibility do the citizens of the global north have to the rest of the world, to turn the tide?

Mega Canal Update

Four years of inactivity, silence and fiscal uncertainty among the foreign backers have led many to wonder if there is still any momentum behind the now infamous Nicaraguan Mega-Canal project. The attempt to bisect the nation continue to be confronted by demonstrations organized by grassroots activists like Francesca Ramírez, public protests by national figures such as Bianca Jagger, and past Nicaraguan vice president and author Sergio Ramírez (no relation) and opposition from the international community, including environmental groups and Amnesty International. Although movement towards the canal at this point seems to have stagnated, the Chinese businessman Wang Jing still holds an exten-



sive concession to Nicaraguan land and waterways. In October, the Ortega administration released a “white paper” outlining six sub-projects related to the canal which the government will purportedly be undertaking. These projects include a deep water port on each of the coasts, a free trade zone in Rivas, a new international airport, and the construction of additional roads and bridges. Though ground has yet to be broken, land seizures from indigenous and mestizo communities are still planned, and the opposition continues to mount. The future of all of the six sub-projects is as worrisome as the proposed mega-canal.

The Water Situation Will Become Critical

On World Water Day, March 22, with the wells in numerous rural areas of Nicaragua already dry, experts warned that the country will face a crisis in the next five to ten years due to the rapid draining of underground water sources, the contamination and/or “death” of rivers and arroyos and the indiscriminate cutting down of the few remaining forests, which has accelerated—in the past decade. Underground sources provide 90% of the water consumed in Nicaragua. The

downing of trees, the inability to stop torrential rain runoff and help the infiltration process, the uncontrolled—and unbilled—extraction of water for industry and agroindustrial irrigation, and increasing temperatures and repeated droughts caused by climate change are depleting these aquifers and could exhaust them in the near future, even as the population continues to grow.

Revista envío #429, April 2017

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Sister County Association**

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Get involved: Delegations to
and from Santo Tomás

George Hartwell ¡Presente!

Please support scholarships
and community projects

Save the 2018 dates:

Rummage Sale on Feb. 10

Plant sale on May 4th

Sustaining Our Connections in 2018 Join us in Nicaragua!

We're organizing not one but TWO community delegations down to Santo Tomás in 2018—one in the summer, which is when we've typically supported the visits, and another one in December 2018 or January 2019, in response to requests that we make this cultural and educational exchange opportunity available at a different time of year to accommodate people's schedules.

Each trip will include a 2 ½ week home-stay in Santo Tomás and a 3-4 day visit to another beautiful part of Nicaragua. While in Santo Tomás, you'll get a chance to participate in the daily lives of your host family, learn about the culture, politics, and history of the region, see and engage in the various projects that TSTSCA is honored to help support, and form lasting bonds.

Those who have traveled from Olympia to Santo Tomás on previous delegations will tell you that they experi-

enced a welcome unlike any other—decades of friendship between our two communities have laid a foundation of such warmth and shared purpose. You are immediately embraced and treated like family. At this moment in history, reaching across borders to sustain such connection feels vital to our humanity.

If you're considering joining one of these trips and would like to learn more, please come to an information night on Thursday, November 16th at 6:00 pm in the cafeteria at Lincoln Elementary School (21st and Washington in the South Capitol neighborhood).

There will be another meeting on Saturday, Dec. 9th (not at Lincoln) at 6pm. Contact us for the location

Hope to see you there! Audrey—
audrey.e.levine@gmail.com and Emily—
ms.calhounpetrie@gmail.com

