

## Nicaragua Through Fresh Eyes

Lisa Fernandez, Beth Porter, Marjory Givens, Jacque Pokorney, Sandra Draus, and Jessica Draus

**B**earing witness to poverty and struggle in the developing world is a powerful experience, and one that many of us have embraced in our work with Sharing Resources Worldwide. The experience changes you, and opens windows in your eyes and your heart that can never be closed again. It is painful and wonderful to realize our connectedness with people whose lives are so different from our own. And the pain and wonder take us down



Marjory visits with kids in their homes in the barrios as part of the outreach efforts of Familias Especiales.

the path to doing what we can to right the injustices wrought by poverty, and to share our resources with those in need.

In September I made my annual visit to Nicaragua to assess the needs of one of SRW's partner organizations, *Familias Especiales*, which serves close to 1,000 handicapped children and their families with a wide range of services. I was lucky enough to bring five others along: an RN from Stoughton and her 13-year-old daughter, two physical therapists and a public health worker. Following are some of their impressions and experiences. As you read their words, carry in your mind the images of the contributions from SRW that are present throughout, even if not specifically mentioned: The wheel-

chair that cradles a child with a birth injury; the walker that allows a young adult to hold a job; the young man barreling through the dirt roads of his *barrio* in his electric wheelchair; the toys given out to the children in the *barrios*; the mattress on the dirt floor of a hut; the child receiving physical therapy on a padded therapy table; the bags of clothes and personal care items being distributed to families in the *barrios*; the school supplies in the school for handicapped children; the sewing machine and fabric at the sewing center. The list goes on and on. These items arrive in the 40-foot containers that SRW sends to Nicaragua several times a year — items that many of you reading this helped collect, sort and send. They make a difference. And that is what SRW is all about.

### From Beth Porter, physical therapist and her sister Marjory Givens, public health worker:

I work as a "float" physical therapist at UW Hospital and am occasionally assigned the orthopedics unit where Lisa Fernandez works as a nurse. One day she mentioned the possibility of accompanying her on one of her trips to Nicaragua. As much as I'm drawn to travel and adventure, my initial reaction was "that sounds awesome, but..." followed by a cascade of excuses why I couldn't make such a trip (work, money, family obligations, not to mention that I can't speak Spanish). I mentioned the trip to my sister, Marjory, who had traveled many times to Nicaragua. Like me, she was attracted to the opportunity, yet also clouded by "responsibilities." But Lisa was persistent. We learned more about her involvement with Sharing Resources Worldwide and admired her initiatives and intention to "be the change you want to see in the world," in the words of Ghandi. Shouldn't we all live with that intention?

In time and with encouragement from our families, we signed up for the ride. We embarked on the week-long journey on Sept. 18, 2009. The transition from a cool autumn day in Madison to the thick heat of Managua, Nicaragua is like turning the dial from fast to sluggish. We arrived in Managua after dark and



Beth puts her physical therapy skills to work at horse-back therapy.

still had a two-hour trek to Matagalpa, where we were transported in style by a driver for *Familias Especiales* in a canvas-covered pick-up truck. Volunteering to ride in back, we were two sisters bumping along the windy rural roads atop the luggage in the back of a pick-up truck. It was a beautiful, albeit exhaust-fume-filled ride, with a star-studded view of the landscape, including a distant thunderstorm rolling in from the coast. Strangely, it was just the right way to connect with a country filled with such juxtapositions.

In Matagalpa, we were received by Sister Rebecca, who was kind enough to provide us with a place to stay. The accommodations were perfect and we enjoyed the feeling of being at the epicenter of activity.

A peaceful night's sleep is not part of the bargain unless you have the foresight to pack earplugs or are a heavy sleeper. The din of dogs barking, roosters crowing and early morning vendors shouting is part of the deal and probably just background noise to the residents of Matagalpa.

Each morning we'd meet the rest of our party at the nearby Café Girasol where we took our meals and planned out our days. Luckily, rice and beans is a meal we enjoy since we would eat it often in many different iterations (rice with beans, beans with rice, rice with cheese and beans, etc.). The women who run Café Girasol are primarily mothers with disabled children who benefit from the services of *Familias Especiales*. Much of the week was spent touring the city, "fact-finding" and visiting the many outreach programs, such as the recycling center, yogurt factory and of course the park for disabled children that had been initiated by Sister Rebecca through *Familias Especiales*. As we walked the streets, again and again we were approached by people who recognized Lisa and welcomed her with hugs and kisses. Nicaraguans are a warm and welcoming people, but clearly her involvement with Sharing Resources Worldwide has touched many, many people in the community.

We came away from this journey hopeful that the stories and pictures we brought home will serve as reminders to ourselves of our responsi-

## Partnering for Strength An Update from SRW

If you're a regular reader of SRW newsletters, you may notice that we don't ship as many containers from our warehouse as we have in previous years. SRW is networking with likeminded organizations to use resources more efficiently; for example, by doing a first sort here in Madison and sending appropriate supplies and equipment to Hospital Sisters Mission Outreach in Springfield, Illinois, for final sorting and shipping. SRW also shares its bounty with other Medical Supply Recovery Organizations (MSRO's) around the U.S., when there's an excess of items that our typical recipients can't use. Other MSROs come to our facility and pick up hospital laundry, orthotic and prosthetic supplies, crutches, walkers and other items to ship from their facilities to recipients worldwide who can make the best use of them. So our inventory is reaching the same



end users — the most needy worldwide. However, we share the costs of shipping with other MSROs, and thus are able to share resources and ship more efficiently.

In 2009, SRW sent nine shipments from our dock, five of which were direct international shipments. Thus, over 250 tons were saved from Wisconsin landfills, and are saving lives and giving hope to many worldwide.

Our three medical and eye-glass missions in 2009 were valued at \$615,000. Our eyeglass team gave complete eye exams to 462 people. Our dental team treated 86 patients. And 72 children received treatment from our surgical teams in Honduras and Peru.

SRW is as active as ever, and as we seek to make the best use of resources. Our hands — and yours — reach far, giving hope and relief to many worldwide. ●



Sister Rebecca, Sandy, Jessie, Marjory and Lisa enjoy a breakfast of gallo pinto at the cafe run by Familias Especiales.

bilities to a bigger community, and that maybe our experiences will touch and inspire others to become involved in even the smallest ways. We saw this trip as an opportunity to step outside of our American life of comfort and security to better understand, and see first-hand, how others live and deal with daily challenges. Despite the myriad barriers that Nicaraguans face in a country with such vast disparities, *Familias Especiales* is a beacon of hope and optimism, intensified by the perseverance of Sister Rebecca.

Grapefruit-sized lemons are abundant in Nicaragua. We picked one on a tour of Selva Negra, a nearby coffee plantation, and brought that elephant-lemon back to Sister Rebecca. We are quite confident that she found a way to make it into a giant-sized glass of sweet lemonade.

### From Sandy Draus, RN, and her daughter Jessie, experiencing Nicaragua for the first time:

This was the first trip to Nicaragua for my 13-year-old daughter, Jessica, and me, and I did not expect the emotional impact it held. To see first-hand the conditions that the people of Matagalpa endure gnawed at my gut daily — like the never-ending plates of *gallo pinto* (rice and beans).

From the noisy streets of town, starting with roosters in the wee hours to the blare of loudspeakers perched on cars promoting local products or events, to the hopelessness of the *barrios*, we were in a very different world. Within this circle, the wave of humanity scrapes low — the elderly beg, the forgotten lay by the road, the women of the *barrios* give their children water from a stream used to wash laundry and bathe, skeletal dogs roam stony roads. We saw so many in need of so much. For mothers of disabled children it is especially isolating and dark.

But through the despair there is a candle — *Familias Especiales* — brought to life through the dedication and tireless effort of a small cadre of people, some local, some drawn to causes of social injustice. They set up and run

cottage industries employing the disabled or their mothers making yogurt, granola, paper bags or artwork, repairing wheelchairs, running a small restaurant. They provide physical therapy, schooling and meals for the children, and outreach and desperately needed support for the mothers. But the biggest thing they do is offer hope for the future and give back pride to struggling mothers and their children. This is no small task. These people are nothing short of heroic.

Some comments from Jessica about her experience: unrelenting sticky heat; colorful town; morale low but they try hard to bring it up with warm, huggy greetings and celebrations; animals in sad shape; people living in plastic sheet houses and cooking on rocks.

### From Jacque Pokorney, physical therapist:

My second trip to Nicaragua with Sharing Resources Worldwide started on a bumpy note (I had lost my passport). It took extra money and a few extra days but I was still able to spend 10 valuable days in Matagalpa with Lisa Fernandez and the wonderful people of *Familias Especiales*.

After my first trip two years ago, I knew I wanted to return and hopefully recruit other health care professionals to come as well. I was able to have that discussion with a fellow physical therapist, Beth Porter, and encourage her and her sister to make the trip.

As a physical therapist, one of the things that I enjoy most about a trip like this is the opportunity to do what I love most, and that is treat patients. And unlike here in the US, it doesn't involve a large bureaucracy with emphasis on discussions of productivity, insurance coverage and copious amounts of paper documentation. You just get to put your hands on a patient and make a difference for even a small amount of time.

But you have to be flexible in your thinking and be willing to be challenged by a lack of equipment and maybe a lack of fluency in Spanish. I had the benefit of knowing what to expect from my previous trip. But on my first day in Matagalpa, I walked into some of the *barrios* (the outlying neighborhoods surrounding the city center) with one of the employees to treat some patients in their homes (the ultimate form of home health therapy), and I did not know that's what I would be doing that day until we arrived at the first home. Once we were there, I needed to jump in and figure out what to do. We visited three patients that Thursday

and made plans to see them again on Monday.

Along with one or two full-time PTs, *Familias Especiales* often has a rotation of PTs who come from Spain to work with them. But currently the program is short-staffed with local therapists and volunteers so any help I could provide during my stay was useful. I spent one afternoon with a Spanish PT in the clinic. On certain days, mothers bring their children to the main park to do therapy in a more traditional setting with traditional PT equipment. The mothers show up at 2 pm, take a number to determine order, and then we go to work. I worked mostly with the younger kids (1-5 years of age) because my lack of Spanish was less of an issue with them. The patients we saw that day had varying diagnoses including spina bifida, hemiparesis, orthopedic injuries, spinal cord injuries, and other neurological conditions likely related to disabilities from birth or acquired later from untreated fevers or infections.

We visited a *hogar de ancianos* (nursing home) in a community 20 minutes from Matagalpa. This hogar is run by Catholic nuns and is a very beautiful place. We primarily went there to learn more about the hogar and their residents. We also had a wonderful fiesta involving some of the older students of *Familias Especiales* and their teachers who made a lovely pinata for the party. We had music and helped the residents



Jacque provides physical therapy at Familias Especiales for a handicapped child (on a therapy table donated by SRW!).

of the hogar hit the pinata until the candy dropped to the floor. It was a great afternoon to bring together the students of the program with the older adults. And it also gave me an opportunity to see the potential to build a therapy program there that currently does not exist.

And that gives me something to work on for the next trip. ●

Interested in learning more about SRW's work in Nicaragua? Contact Lisa Fernandez at [pocoapocolisa@juno.com](mailto:pocoapocolisa@juno.com).

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# Restored Sight and Other Miracles

By Mary Dowling

It happens every year: thousands of people in Wisconsin receive new eyeglass prescriptions and donate their used glasses to the local Lions Club. Do you ever wonder where those glasses go? In June, 2009, several thousand pair were shipped to the Tougue area of Guinea, Africa, where a Sharing Resources



Dr. Gal checks another child while mother looks on.

Worldwide mission team brought new hope and corrected vision to many people, with a simple but cherished recycled resource: eyeglasses.

Team members came to Guinea from across the world on this SRW mission to provide eye exams and glasses for those in need. Dr. Aviva Gal came from Tel Aviv; Adam Dowling and Hadja Dowling, optician, and Jennifer Lude-man, optician, came from Oshkosh, Wisconsin; I came from Mt. Horeb, Wisconsin; and Dr. Augustine came from a clinic just three hours away in Labe, Guinea, to work together for six days on this SRW project. Of the 462 patients we screened, 433 needed treatment. Our team referred 92 patients for cataract surgery in Labe (which is the nearest city), and treated 17 patients for infections. We were able to give 351 people eyeglasses donated by the Lions Foundation of Wisconsin.

A mission trip like this would be impossible without the support of our local partners. Since multiple languages are used in this region, many local young people assisted with our exams and translation. The mission team stayed with Hadja's mother, whose family took very good care of us. Even their neighbors helped by offering me a place in their living room when I got caught in a rainstorm (rainstorms in

Africa are not like any you've ever seen!). Many people in the village supported our mission by providing us with food and supplies, including several gifts of live chickens. We visited a local farming community and saw many beautiful sights throughout Guinea.

Many hours every day without electricity presented challenges, but the community donated a generator at our eyeglass mission site, and this enabled us to accomplish our goals. When the week was over, we left the surplus eyeglasses with a nonprofit organization which operates a clinic in Labe, the same clinic to which we referred patients for cataract treatment.

Each of us had a memorable cultural experience as we shared our knowledge and expertise with friends across the globe, and we learned much from our counterparts and patients. Christians, Muslims and Jewish people were united by a common goal — to help those in need.

## Miracles happen on every mission trip

Those of us who travel regularly on missions see miracles where others might not. For example, freedom from car problems during many hours of travel is something we no longer take for granted. We had no vehicle issues on this trip. We also give thanks that our whole team stayed healthy all week. But the most outstanding miracle happened after Adam discovered, upon arriving in Guinea ahead of the team, that a crucial piece of eye exam equipment was missing from his luggage. He called me, and the search for a replacement was on. I found a Florida company (thank you, Reichert!) willing to donate a replacement, which they rushed to me in Mt. Horeb so I could carry it to Tougue in my luggage. Four months after our mission, I received a call from the airline by which we traveled through Brussels, Belgium, to Guinea. Guess what they found wedged into a small spot between the interior and exterior wall in the cargo hold of the plane? Thankfully, our SRW name and contact information were on the piece of equipment, and in October we received it from the airline, in the same condition as when



Mary and assistants Souleymane and Bobo, who were translators and technicians by the end of the week.

we packed it in May! Miracles do happen.

For their support of this mission, we wish to thank:

- The Zwingli United Church of Christ in Mt. Vernon, Wisconsin
- Several other area churches
- The following Lions Clubs in Wisconsin: Verona Lions (*especially* Verona Lions), Albany Lions, Arlington Lions, Brodhead Lions, Cobb Lions, Cross Plains Lions, Cuba City Lioness, Edgerton Lions, Evansville Lions, Hazel Green Lions, Lake Wisconsin Lions, Lancaster Lions, McFarland Lions, and Oregon Lioness
- and Reichert Ophthalmic Instruments. ●



Our 2009 SRW Guinea eyeglass team. Back row: Adam, Bobo, Souleymane, Jenny, Dr. Aviva Gal. Front row: Madiou and El Hadj, Hadja (holding Oumou), Dr. Augustine and Mary Dowling.

## Change in Lisa's Role

As a founder and a longtime volunteer with SRW, my deep and proven commitment and dedication to SRW is unwavering. SRW has accomplished more than we ever thought possible, and has opened doorways for us to find meaningful ways to make a difference in this world. Our work is ongoing and will continue. I am so proud of all of us volunteers!

My nursing career is a vital part of my life. Becoming fluent in Spanish is a long-held goal that I am working to achieve. I also have a deepening interest in global health and in social, economic, political and infrastructure factors in the developing world. I am choosing

to resign my role as co-director of SRW in order to expand my explorations and work in these areas. I will continue in my role as director of the Wisconsin/Nicaragua Wheelchair Project and as an enthusiastic volunteer and supporter of SRW's mission and activities.

Stand by for my call for help preparing another container that will make a difference!

—Lisa Fernandez

For more information about the Wisconsin/Nicaragua Wheelchair Project, email Lisa at pocoapocolisa@juno.com ●

Founded in January 2002, Sharing Resources Worldwide makes surplus and recycled medical supplies, durable medical equipment, and related items and activities available to needy populations around the world. SRW endeavors to improve the health and quality of life of its recipients and to empower them to live with increased dignity, independence, and hope.

We do this through three areas—medical missions, shipping and the wheelchair project.

All donations are tax deductible.

Please make checks payable to:

**Sharing Resources Worldwide.**

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## VIVA OUR VOLUNTEERS

The annual Sharing Resources Worldwide Volunteer Appreciation Dinner was held on Oct. 24 at the Kennedy Manor Dining Room and Bar in downtown Madison. About 50 SRW volunteers and their guests gathered for an evening of delicious food, inspiring talks, relaxation, conversation and door prizes. This event is an opportunity for the



Solomon and Aurora Grace deliver stuffed animals they collected with their parents Tony and Kathy.

many people who volunteer for SRW in different capacities — whose paths may not cross in the course of their work — to meet, talk and share the energy of their commitment to Sharing Resources Worldwide.

Our speakers were Brad Walton, logistics and warehouse manager of Hospital Sister Mission Outreach (HSMO), and John and Katie Schacherl. Brad gave us a lively overview of the history and work of HSMO. He inspired all of us with his statistics and descriptions of how the partnership between SRW and HSMO is furthering both of our missions to bring help to needy people worldwide and save waste from local landfills. John and Katie spoke movingly about the dental mission to Honduras they partici-

pated in earlier this year, and their descriptions of the conditions they saw and worked in made it very clear what a difference their efforts made in the lives of the children they treated, many of whom had never received any dental care.

There are so many reasons to celebrate our volunteers and their service. Without them there would be no SRW, and *because* of them thousands in need are benefiting from the resources SRW shares. Our volunteers give the gift of hope by giving of themselves, and there is no better gift than that.

We would like to thank all who contributed to making this dinner such a success:

- **Marita Menard** for bringing her talents to bear on the planning, organizing, and decorating for the dinner
  - **The staff of Kennedy Manor** for providing their venue for our event and for the delicious food
  - **Deer Valley Golf Course, Roy Gibson, Kaye Lillesand, The Oaks Golf Course, Pizza Hut, Style Fx Hair Studio, Supreme Health and Fitness, Unique Arts LLC, C J Werley, WISCO, and Brandon Vincent** for their generous donations of door prizes
  - **Brad Walton and John and Katie Schacherl** for being our guest speakers.
- Most of all, we thank all our volunteers.*

## We Need You!

Due to the fact that several of our valuable volunteers recently relocated out of the Madison area, we especially need nurses who are available on Tuesdays and Thursdays for at least two hours to help sort medical supplies at our warehouse. If you are interested or if you know someone who might be, please contact Mary at 608-445-8503 or [mdowl@tds.net](mailto:mdowl@tds.net).

## Gifts of Comfort and Joy

How does an active organization like SRW survive and accomplish so much, without paid staff? By relying in a priceless resource: YOU. There are many ways you can donate your volunteer effort to SRW. You don't have to be a surgeon or an RN, a board member or a wealthy donor.

For example, two young children in New York recently sent SRW several bags of stuffed animals so that staff on our medical missions can give toys to children who have surgery. These kids got busy collecting stuffed toys after their aunt heard that SRW needed them. Thank you, Solomon and Aurora Grace! Thank you also to Marie LaFontaine, an SRW volunteer who scours garage sales for soft, clean stuffed animals and distributes our brochures in hopes that unsold and "unwanted" stuffed toys will be donated for our shipments and medical missions.

Several groups and individuals make quilts and blankets for our surgical missions so each child who

has surgery can receive a new blanket of his or her own. In fact, one of our volunteers, Ron McDonald, has made over 200 blankets for SRW. In addition, ladies at the Bonnet Prairie Lutheran Church make dozens of blankets each year.

Several church groups and individuals collect baby supplies and clothes for baby kits we send to new moms and babies in the Matagalpa area of Nicaragua. Thank you, DeForest Christ Lutheran Church and other generous donors.

Basic school supplies are badly needed in Nicaragua, Honduras and Peru. Thank you, Bill and Jim and Roz and the Menomonie Lions Club and Sauk Trails Optimists, for your collection and donation of many pallets of school supplies; all have gone out in recent shipments.

None of these items save lives, but they bring comfort, warmth and joy to many who face hardship, illness and fear. With handmade blankets, we wrap our patients in the love and care of our donors. Stuffed animals delight and comfort children who are afraid. These gifts allow SRW to minister to the mind and spirit as well as the body.

If I missed your name, I apologize, but limited space does not allow me to list all names and groups.

We're always open to your creative ideas, so think outside the box and give us a call if you have something you would like to collect or a way you'd like to volunteer for SRW. Contact Mary Dowling at 608-445-8503. ●

## Contributors

SRW wishes to thank the following for their contribution of in-kind donations of supplies, equipment or services to support our programs:

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