



# Project Minnesota/León

*a people to people sister state program with León, Nicaragua*

---

## Summer 2014 Newsletter

### **Cumbre Reflections**

In the last edition of this newsletter we noted that the northern members of the board would travel to León for a summit or *cumbre* with the southern members. The result of that meeting was a major change in direction and new leadership. Kara Beckman, the new president of the board, explained this in her talk at the Fiesta last November:

We're so honored to have you here to celebrate our work together and to build momentum for another year of solidarity and partnership. A special thank you to Minnesota Secretary of State Mark Ritchie for joining us, and a special welcome to those of you to whom we owe our gratitude for having founded this organization nearly 30 years ago after returning from a Witness for Peace trip in the 1980s.

As you know, PML supports community initiatives in León and fosters relationships and cultural exchange between the people of Nicaragua and Minnesota. We strive to create a model of sincere solidarity between MN and León centering our work on fostering joint efforts shared by members of PML in the north and the south, developing leadership in partner communities through projects, and promoting the involvement of delegates and partner institutions in the life of PML

This has been a year of exciting accomplishments along with deep reflection. Thanks to your support we: improved the quality of bathrooms and hand-washing facilities in the Dulce Sonrisa preschool; provided ongoing support for the Xuchialt Arts & Dance School, including scholarships for local youth to attend art and dance classes, and materials and funds for special events; built a security fence around the Gotitas de Esperanza preschool; and constructed a playground outside the San Carlos health clinic. We also hosted three delegations, developing new relationships and deepening others between Nicaraguans and Minnesotans.

And yet, over several years, the board began to develop concerns that our project work was not fully engaging the assets of the communities with whom we work, and while we could be proud of many things, our impact was more localized than we hoped. The means to the end in doing project work in community was not receiving enough attention. If we're about friendship and solidarity, then we must pay appropriate attention to the process as well as the product.

To illustrate, I invite you to come on a journey with me. As northern board members did in August, visualize a 10-hour trip, going through Miami or Houston, and landing in Managua - feel the hot, humid air as you deplane. Then a two-hour journey by van to León in the northwest, just inland from the Pacific coast, meeting up with our León Coordinator and the seven local board members.

The next day we all head off, northern and southern board members, to visit the *Gotitas de Esperanza* preschool. We hear Don Martin's amazing and inspirational stories about what the pre-school has meant to the community and his ideas for continual improvement, and hear his gratitude and excitement for the relationships that were built with the two delegations his community has hosted. And then wonder out loud with me – who's working with you on all this? What future leaders are you mentoring? And hear him say, "well, no one else is really interested in doing this kind of work." And wonder, really? That's so different from many of the Nicaraguans I know. My experience tells me that just like in the U.S., there are many people with many motivations. Could the structure of our process be enabling communities to let only one strong leader do most of the work?

Next, let's head farther west toward the Pacific, and pull off onto the gravel road that leads to the San Carlos Health Center. As Don Mario greets us, recall that when we first came to this community six years ago, we were greeted by 30-35 adults and a similar number of children. We hear about the playground, the new water pump, and see the electric posts that are about to be put up. The clinic has been functioning two days/week for three years without running water or electricity and yet is seeing around 50 patients per week, because it's the closest health clinic for the 850 or so residents in the area. Feel pride with me and gratitude at this project we have done together, remembering the work with the Mayor's office and Ministry of Health to fulfill their commitments to provide staffing and basic services. But then wonder what in our way of working with San Carlos didn't prevent this too from turning into a mostly one-man crusade supported by us. Ask Don Mario as well – who works with you on this? Is there anyone from the next generation who will be a leader like you? And hear the same reaction from him, "there's really no one else." Think again, really? Is it true that there is only one person per community who is willing to work for community development, or might it be that PML could have done something better?

Now we go east, until we get to the place where the van can go no further. Get out and walk with me. After 20 minutes we head up a path to a residence with a large shade tree out front. We wait for 15 local women to gather for their meeting with PRODESSA, to observe how this organization works with communities, and to hear their stories: of camping at the doorstep of the mayor's office to call him to account for three years of delay in getting electricity to their community; of analyzing barriers and realizing that poor access for commercial vehicles was impeding the installation, so they organized the community to get out and improve the road using shovels and machetes; of appreciation for this new method of working and the importance of the analysis process in prioritizing needs, considering stakeholders and creating action plans; and their conclusion that, "we no longer need an outside organization to help us. If they leave and we identify our next problem, we can tackle it ourselves, together."

Realize with me and the rest of the PML board, north and south, that what we're witnessing is a model of working with community which more fully embodies the mission and vision of PML. That it's more true to the idea of working in solidarity, increasing sustainability by building up the strengths and capacities of many people. The model develops a large number of community leaders rather than our most recent experience of working through 1 or 2 community leaders, and it also provides an option to work more intentionally with young people and women.

The method specifically analyzes with community members whether public institutions should play a role in the solution and strategizes how to approach them, rather than having to rely on external aid organizations. In further conversations with PRODESSA staff we learn the community organizing method is being taught in social work and other degree programs at the university in León, that it's highly researched and proving quite effective. This raises the hope that we could employ a university-prepared Nicaraguan full-time to organize communities, facilitate the method, and work together to achieve community-identified priority projects. Listen as PRODESSA staff say they'd partner with us to test this model in an urban setting, and would help ensure our staff are fully trained. Now, as your excitement builds, realize that this is a new model, that it's conceptually where we think we want to be and thus it's easy to be excited about it, but it means real changes to our program model. It means focusing for a while on transition, and dedicating funding to the process of developing a better way of working, a way of understanding the assets in our partner communities, of building relationships and shared leadership, and a way of prioritizing the means to the end. And wonder if it will be as motivating for our donors to support with funds. Choose to have faith with me that supporters will step up, that they'll agree, that they believe in the Nicaraguan people as much as you and I do and want to give this a try.

Now let's make a final visit, to Xuchiolt, where 20 people have gathered, including the young leaders - male and female, abled and disabled, veterans and newcomers. We hear their vision, including ideas for expanding their funding base and the new relationships they are building, about their earned income plans and new sources of donations. We hear about leadership succession and committee work and their hopes for maintaining programming while buying a new plot of land that would allow them to build their own building. Think with me, yes! It's happening within our partner communities. This is exciting and inspiring in so many ways. And realize, that just like in the U.S., shared leadership may not be the natural leadership style that emerges, but it's a skill and can be learned through training. And think – as an organization we need to be able to not have this be an accident, we can and should make this our way of working.

So, we invite you to consider joining us... for the 30<sup>th</sup> year, the 5<sup>th</sup> year or the 1<sup>st</sup> year. Join us by talking with your friends, other PML supporters, and people at your place of worship, to gather a group for a delegation. Join us by donating to continue supporting Xuchiolt, and to fund a new staff position – a Nicaraguan Projects Coordinator, who will be trained in the PRODESSA model and spend the next year working with the board to figure out the best blend of the PRODESSA model and PML's mission to implement our new projects vision. This person will engage with Don Martin, Don Carlos and communities where strong leaders have not emerged yet. Your help will allow us to transition our current coordinator role into a PML Director role, who will focus on recruiting, planning and facilitating delegations, and spend a few months annually in Minnesota to advance our work here and complete the required duties of office oversight in León.

I invite you to join us because this vision I have just laid out is what inspired me to accept the role of president of the PML Board. While I believe it's a challenge, I also believe it will continue our journey toward true solidarity. As you listen to Secretary Ritchie talk about peace through friendship, consider the deepest meaning of those words. I invite you to feel the excitement of PML's board and staff about this new step forward, which we believe will strengthen our friendship with León and build a better foundation for peace and justice in our communities. And I invite you to challenge us, to ask questions and, above all, to engage.

## New Structure – New PML Director

In keeping with our new direction, our current PML Coordinator, Meredith (see “Comings & Goings”), was promoted to PML Director in January, and this summer she’s been working in tandem with our next PML Director Elizabeth Moreira who will take over solo this fall. Elizabeth has a special history with PML – she was a founder and the first in-country coordinator back in 1984! Since then she’s received a Master’s in Leadership, worked in non-profits administration, and managed an architectural business with her husband. After raising three children, they bought a retirement home in Nicaragua, and Elizabeth taught English, pre-school, and paper arts. When the opportunity arose to return to PML, to share her extensive experience and skills, she jumped in saying: “We’ve seen changes in technology, politics, agriculture, economics and program organization, but the spirit of people-to-people connections and community building has been a constant hallmark”.



## New Board Members

We have five new board members in León! Four of the five are in the photo below, along with two current board members, Rubén and Idalia. From left to right: Agustín Orlando Aragón Téllez, Rubén Centeno Moreno, Alicia Junieth Léyton Beyes, Idalia Ruiz, Maria Luisa Avendaño Peralta, and Lenin José Pérez. Not pictured is Maria del Rosario Cáceres.



## Update on Xuchialt

*Bienvenidos* to Allan Lindo, the new director of the Xuchialt Artist Workshop, one of PML’s long-standing partnerships. Allan started out as a student at Xuchialt, became a teacher’s assistant and then an art professor. He replaces Marlon Moreno. Allan was just interviewed by Al-Jazeera about the impact of murals on Nicaragua. Check out their website for the video!



## Future Delegations

PML is currently in the planning stages for several delegations, summer 2015 to early 2016:

- Teaching English at the University of Leon's Language Center or a public elementary school
- Youth Cultural Exchange of First Universalist will welcome the Nica teens to Minnesota (see article) and a separate delegation will travel to Leon.
- Business Leadership group through Concordia College's Masters Program
- Diversity & Family Therapy group through the University of St. Thomas Masters Program
- Augsburg College Masters Program seminar

Do you have a group with an idea for a future delegation? PML can facilitate an in-depth analysis of a topic through the experience of connecting with the people of León. Here are just a few possible themes: Human Development in the Context of Community - led by our new Projects Coordinator; Social and Legal Ramifications of Immigration; The Status of Women 35 Years After the Revolution; and Going Green: Priorities and Reality in Nicaragua. For more ideas or to start work on a delegation, contact Deborah Allan: [dallan@umn.edu](mailto:dallan@umn.edu).

## Fiesta 2013 - ¡Que Viva León!

After the annual appeal, the Fiesta is the greatest source of revenue for PML. But just as important, it's a way to network and make personal contact with the PML Board, delegates and delegation leaders, former staff, and fellow supporters - and to celebrate!

Last year's Fiesta was one of our most successful ever, both financially and for generating enthusiasm for PML's work and mission. The keynote by Minnesota Secretary of State Mark Ritchie positioned PML's cross-cultural relationship with Nicaragua within a continuum of peaceful cultural exchanges in Minnesota history dating back to the interchange between native American tribes at Pipestone thousands of years ago. Enjoying great food and music, over 200 people attended the Fiesta, and PML raised over \$15,000. *Muchas gracias* to the following who provided special donations for the silent and live auctions:

- Businesses: Acme Comedy Club, Baker's Wife, Buen Viaje Tours, Butter Bakery, Calhoun Cycle, Clyde's Service, Grand Café, Grass Roots Gourmet, Longfellow Grill, Minnesota Opera, Park Square Theater, , Regla de Oro, Salty Tart, The Produce Exchange, and Tin Fish.
- Individuals: Dianne Beckman, Nancy Breeding, Diane Bundlie, Connie David, Millie Dosh, Annie Fontaine, Jack & Shar Hauer, Missie Jacobson, Andrea & Doreen Kloehn, Nathan Lind, Jan Lynch, Steve Manderscheid, Marion Moreno, Claire & Gary Nelson, David & Ruth & Maria Olson, Keith Olstad, Stephanie Owen-Lyons, Alina Sabatke, Kahtryn Schmidt, Gail Speckmann, Dan Swenson-Klatt, Mike Troutman, Mary Vorhes, and Rick Ziton.

Your financial gifts are essential to continuing this important work. From the PML Fiesta to the annual fundraising appeal, your generosity makes a vital difference. We invite you to consider a special gift to PML now, which can help bridge the gap until our traditional fundraising time later in the year. To make a donation go to: [http://www.mn-leon.org/donate\\_now.aspx](http://www.mn-leon.org/donate_now.aspx) Or you can send a check to: PML, 2315 Chicago Ave, Minneapolis, MN 55404.



# ¡Que Viva León!

## Project Minnesota-León Fiesta Fundraiser

Saturday, October 25, 2014  
6:15pm

Church of St. Albert the Great  
2836 33rd Ave S, Minneapolis

### Keynote Speakers

First Latina Minneapolis City Councilwoman,  
Immigration Activist -Alondra Cano

Founding and now current PML Coordinator  
-Elizabeth (Sander) Moreira

Latin fusion dinner,  
Mojitos, Vino, Cerveza,  
Live music, Silent & Live Auctions

## YCE Delegation – Twenty-four 24/7

First Universalist Church of Minneapolis sent its fifth Youth Cultural Exchange (YCE) delegation to León this summer. It has been such a popular and life changing experience for the youth of that church that another group of 12 teens will go to León next summer, while this year's group hosts their Nicaraguan 'siblings' for a reciprocal visit here in Minnesota, a truly two-way cultural exchange! Here's a report from this summer's visit:

Every delegation creates its own personality, and this year's YCE delegation was no exception. This dancing bunch was sporty, creative, and musical. Most evenings saw a pickup soccer game in the neighborhood. We hauled around a suitcase of materials to make friendship bracelets of beads and plastic lacing for lanyards so the kids were rarely without a project in hand. If a bus ride was long enough, the boys in the back would start their techno music, roll into "Tsunami" and eventually the whole bus would be singing "We Will, We Will Rock You."

The Minnesota youth were introduced to their new surroundings with an intense history lecture and then, with their Nica siblings, toured the Revolution Museum and did a scavenger hunt downtown, including bartering for fruit in the market. Other days were filled with activities such as learning to make tortillas, milking a cow, playing with kids at a day care center, relaxing at the beach, climbing a volcano, and planting fruit trees at the local elementary school.

At the farewell fiesta the Minnesota youth performed a wacky mashup dance they had choreographed for their amazed Nicaraguan families and, together with their Nica siblings, presented a folkloric dance they had learned. There was no shortage of volunteers willing to smash the piñatas the youth made with the help of new PML Board member Lenín Pérez - who awed us with a fire dance at the fiesta and gave informative tours of the murals downtown and the indigenous neighborhood of Sutiava.



## Other Delegations

Two other delegations this past summer included a group of educators, and Augsburg College's Masters Level "Universal Responsibility" seminar group.

## Comings and Goings

- *Adios y buena suerte* to board members and staff who have left in the past year: Magda Carolina Mayorga, Ernesto Jose Solis Montiel, Bernabe Perez, Lissette Saavedra Calderon, Deysi Sánchez, Orlando Sarria (former board president), and Mike Troutman.



- *Muchas gracias* also to Keith OIstad, another former board president, who will retire from the board at the end of the year. Keith spent two months this winter teaching English to guides and homestay hosts in the Miraflores Reserve north of Estelí. During his time there he travelled to León to participate in PML board meetings.

- Last December, while in Minnesota, our current PML Director Meredith and her husband Will welcomed a healthy, happy baby boy named Johnny. They moved back to sunny Nicaragua after a few bitterly cold winter weeks. PML's recent delegations have met the whole family, settled back in León for now. After Meredith's PML tenure is up, the Rodriguez family is considering a move back to Minnesota where Meredith looks forward to seeing familiar PML faces as she continues collaborating with us.



## PML Newsletter Via Email & Online

As promised, this issue of the newsletter is being sent via email and posted on our website, [www.mn-leon.com](http://www.mn-leon.com). This action will save PML money and volunteer energy, leaving more of both for PML activities and projects! We will be sending the Fiesta invitation and distribute our year-end letter and funds appeal via snailmail.

**To add, remove or change your email address send a note to: [jemcall@comcast.net](mailto:jemcall@comcast.net)**  
***Muchas gracias!***