

Newsletter • Spring 2019

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Strengthening human and community development since 1984, through the exchange of people and ideas between Minnesota and León, Nicaragua.

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### MARK YOUR CALENDAR

## Save the Dates: Two PML Events!

BY DEBORAH ALLAN

### July Fundraiser and Gathering with Nicaraguan Guests

On **Tuesday, July 9**, we will host project coordinator Rosa Lira Ulloa, who will tell us about PML's ongoing community development work and update us on the current political situation in Nicaragua.

This free event will take place at First Universalist Church from 6:30 to 8:30 p.m. and will include Nicaraguan youth, who will be here on an exchange with youth from First Universalist, and their two adult chaperones.

We hope to raise funds to further our community work and to compensate for lost revenues since we have not been able to host any immersion travel groups in Nicaragua since early 2018.

### **PML Annual Fiesta Fundraiser**

This year's annual Fiesta Fundraiser will take place on **Saturday, October 26**, 6:15–9:00 p.m., at the Church of St. Albert the Great. We will return to our typical format of a social hour with live music, followed by a Latin-inspired meal, short program (TBA), and live and silent auctions. We hope to see you there!



#### THE MINNESOTA BOARD

## **PML Board Selects New Leaders**

At the April 1<sup>st</sup> PML board meeting, the following people were elected to positions of leadership in Minnesota:

- Ralph Baumgartner, president
- Deborah Allan, treasurer
- Jean Lubke, secretary

Carolyn Liebler also continues to serve as a member of the board, and we welcome Kristie Hennig as the newest member of the board. (See her bio below.)

#### BOARD PRESIDENT'S REPORT

## **What's PML Up To?**

BY RALPH BAUMGARTNER



Since last fall's fiesta, the PML board has been analyzing input from World Café participants at the event.

This spring the board is working to rate the potential degree of impact and feasibility of these suggestions.

Meanwhile, some of the recommendations we

heard (bolded phrases in the list below) are already underway.

- We have **increased our work in local communities** near León as well as supporting work our organizer Rosa Lira Ulloa is doing there. Specifically, while work in San Carlos is continuing, Rosa has also hired an intern to work with her in a new effort in the adjacent community of La Gallina.
- Elizabeth Moreira and I are **supporting Rosa** through regular conversations with her by Skype, and the whole board checks in with Rosa when it meets monthly. We also have encouraged her to participate in leadership development programs in Nicaragua, which she is doing.
- We are excited that a **Youth Cultural Exchange** is being planned. A dozen Nicaraguan youth and their two chaperones succeeded in getting U.S. visas, and they will be coming to Minnesota, probably in July.
- Elizabeth has been sharing monthly **news updates from Nicaragua**. If you would like to subscribe to these updates, send her an email at [minnesotaleon@gmail.com](mailto:minnesotaleon@gmail.com) and write TIMELINE in the subject. Elizabeth has also offered to share the "Timeline of the Political Crisis" display at churches and community events.
- We are planning to **bring Rosa to Minnesota** in July and are hosting an informational meeting and fundraiser, to which you are invited, for the evening of Tuesday, July 9. Rosa will be featured at this event along with one or two other people from Nicaragua. Mark your calendars!
- We are committed to **work to build partnerships with other organizations**. Elizabeth and Emily Wallace-Jackson met with Mark Ritchie, executive director of Global Minnesota. He has agreed to publicize appropriate upcoming events and trips. Emily has begun a conversation to collaborate on immersion trips with the Center for Mission, serving Twin Cities Catholic parishes. We have also connected with Lutheran pastors Jorge and Stephanie Espinoza; he is from Nicaragua.
- We are intending to **increase fundraising efforts**. Thus, we are planning a July event, the annual Fiesta, and an end-of-year ask towards this goal.
- We want to **encourage the empowerment of youth in Nicaragua and help them build leadership skills**. San Carlos youth are still meeting with Rosa, members of the OMEGAS group have been trained to give a workshop on risk behavior, and the YCE teens are participating in a leadership development course through *Soluciones Comunitarios*.

Thank you for your generous support in PML and also thank you for your interest in the people of Nicaragua!

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#### SAN CARLOS UPDATE, PART 1

## Welcome, Lilliam!

BY ELIZABETH MOREIRA



What's better than having Project Coordinator Rosa Lira Ulloa working for PML? It's having her train a paid intern in the model of collaborative community development and expanding our reach. Meet Lilliam Carina Vargas Mayorga.

Lilliam's previous experience comprises a wide variety of jobs, including working with sea turtle hatching and mangrove reforestation in protected areas around Las Peñitas beach, as well as fast food administration. She also served for three years as administrative assistant for an Austria/León cooperative project and sister cities organization.

Lilliam's university degree is in biology, and she has completed a course in accounting. However, Lilliam states she is excited to strengthen her professional credentials and broaden her understanding of community development.



Having grown up in a rural area and with her agricultural student practice and diverse past employment, Lilliam has had the opportunity to get to know and work alongside folks in the "campo." This gives her an insight into the difficulties and needs of that sector. She looks forward to returning to work alongside residents in these vulnerable communities.

Working 20 hours a week, for the first half of the year Lilliam will shadow Rosa in all the meetings and activities in La Gallina. Her responsibilities include administrative and logistic support, including taking minutes and creating other documentation. By the second cycle of the year, Lilliam will be 60 percent

responsible for the community process.

Rosa is pleased to have a colleague on the ground, as well as to share her wealth of knowledge. The two women already complement each other. Rosa encourages Lilliam to prepare to take a leading role in La Gallina and welcomes her organizational skills.

#### INTRODUCING LA GALLINA

## PML Expands Community Work

BY ELIZABETH MOREIRA



“The Hen” and “the Reform” are the translated names of the rural community, neighbor to San Carlos, where PML is expanding a process of community development this year.

The community configuration, like that of San Carlos, has roots in the agrarian reform following the 1979 revolution, when land was dedicated to farm cooperatives. The population increased in 2013–2014 as individuals received titles when cooperatives disbanded and the land was redistributed to private owners.

Property allocation was under the jurisdiction of the Indigenous Community, yet it is important to note that certain former León municipal officials are the landlords of some of the largest farmland plots.

### Two Farm Economies

The area is used for agriculture, but major landowners gain an advantage by farming large tracts with more access to resources and better efficiencies of scale. The small farmers of La Gallina have suffered, like most small farmers throughout the country, and eke out a subsistence living. They are limited to cultivating small crops of corn, sorghum, vegetables, and bananas, and raising barely productive livestock.



Initially La Gallina and smaller La Reforma sectors felt like a single community. This situation deteriorated over time, and worsened when cooperatives were broken up. The land was divided into political territories of La Gallina 1, La Gallina 2, and La Reforma, arbitrarily structuring leadership positions. The residents have expressed a lack of representation and abandonment by public service institutions.

## A Community Left Behind

La Gallina elementary school has served as the headquarters of local government for both municipal and indigenous representatives, but weak organization has left residents complaining of the absence of community integration and total exclusion of the most vulnerable families.



Project Minnesota/León is supporting Rosa and half-time intern Lilliam Carina Vargas Mayorga to begin a process of community development. It begins with reflection sessions that provide a warm, trusting space to gather thoughts and concerns in the most efficient way.

Four small groups have formed, composed mostly of women heads of households. They have expressed that they currently live by the adage “every man for himself” and look forward to the opportunity to have their voices heard.

### SAN CARLOS UPDATE, PART 2

## Community Development Efforts Continue

BY ELIZABETH MOREIRA



Typically, a new round of a community development process begins with small group meetings. But this year was different, because San Carlos has already built such a strong community framework. So, the OMEGAS advocacy group decided to begin the year with an assembly and

invited all residents to address several key issues.

## Water

In an open and friendly meeting, the Water Committee (CAPS) informed about 80 attendees that it was successful in petitioning the national water board to lower the tariff on area water consumption. The savings was passed on to residents, which reduced the minimum charge to households.

By an overwhelming majority, the community voted to cut off the water supply to residents who (1) have not paid their bill for three consecutive months and (2) did not contact the CAPS to give a reason or offer to work out a payment plan.

This is an unusual action for rural residents, who have been known to threaten violence against CAPS members who attempted to cut off their water.

Subsequently, all debtors paid up or made arrangements, eliminating the need to shut off anyone's water. The positive outcome can be attributed to good communication and all residents having a stake in the whole process.

CAPS also agreed to review water meters of residents who complained of spikes in a recent bill. In one precedent-setting case, CAPS halved the contested bill when a leak was found.

CAPS was invited by SuNica (an international nonprofit specializing in technical support for potable water) to a gathering to celebrate UN World Water Day (March 22). Participants had many questions for San Carlos representatives on how they handled a variety of problems. They also wanted to know how to maintain constructive participation among residents. San Carlos is seen as a model community to emulate.



## Recreation Area

Also at the assembly, San Carlos residents voted to prioritize the acquisition of a recreation area (and ultimately a community center), which has been an on-going project spearheaded by the youth. OMEGAS is deciding on strategies to support the effort.



One action taken was to contact the Indigenous Community (IC) organization, which has jurisdiction over all land rights from the western edge of León to the Pacific Ocean. While the IC is not able to finance the recreation project, they have influence in other respects.

They can help make the purchase of land go more smoothly by approving the sale quickly, perhaps at a lower cost, and pushing through the process at the León municipal government level, where the sale needs to be recorded and taxes paid.

The IC may help in other ways as well. For example, they could intervene on behalf of San Carlos to ask neighboring sugar cane owners to lend earth-moving machinery to level the property or perhaps encourage the owners to support the project with funds.

IC considers San Carlos to be the best-run community under its jurisdiction and is more inclined to push through the acquisition of property.

Currently, the budget for purchasing 2.6 acres of land is \$19,000. The youth have saved about \$300 generated by fundraising activities. PML has \$9,000 of designated funds, accumulated over the past few years.



## Education

An overwhelming majority of residents voted to ask OMEGAS to co-lead (along with the parents' group) efforts to improve the quality of elementary education. One advocacy action is to get the Ministry of Education to supervise staff more closely.

Other objectives are to reduce class size, begin and end classes on time to complete classroom hours, stabilize attendance in order to request an additional teacher, and strengthen teacher/parent relations.

For the first time, three levels of high school tutoring are available to teens and





adults who have left formal education. This has been well received by the community. Instructors include university students, such as former YCE participant Esther.

OMEGAS will follow up on maintaining the 2018 reduced bus tariff agreement for students in uniform.

## Health

The year began without a doctor at the San Carlos Health Center. OMEGAS called on the Sutiava director, who oversees the rural area. They requested a doctor be immediately placed for this year.

They also advocated to make this a permanent position, not just a temporary placement of a doctor who is required by law to give a year's social service after graduating from the public university. Within a week after their request, medical personnel were sent, at least for this year.



## Youth

Two adult residents were trained to lead the “Dále, Sé Real” program, the Nicaraguan version of the “Keepin’ it REAL” program—strategies to help young people stay away from drugs and alcohol. The ten sessions prepare teens to act confidently when facing difficult situations.

This action was in response to a request from the youth for guidance on how to handle drugs (especially marijuana) at school and in the community, and particularly on how to deal with concerns for friends with substance abuse issues.



The San Carlos female soccer team continues to practice, currently chalking boundary lines in the back yard of a generous resident. They have had two friendly scrimmages with a team from neighboring beach town Poneloya—one win and one loss, including a heart-stopping shoot out. The spectators expressed how well the girls played and how much they have improved.

#### YOUTH CULTURAL EXCHANGE

## Nicaraguan Teens to Visit Minnesota

BY ELIZABETH MOREIRA



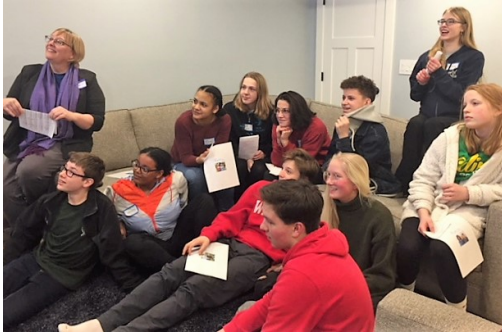
Twelve Nicaraguan teens were selected in January to participate in the Youth Cultural Exchange, a program of First Universalist Church facilitated by PML. This round will be different from past exchanges.

In order to allow more time for Nicaragua to overcome the socio-political turmoil that began a year ago, the Nicaraguans will come to Minnesota first, and the Minnesotan teens will visit their Nicaraguan host families next year.

The participants' neighborhood is Praderas de Nuevo León, located at the outer eastern part of the city in a newer housing development, with host homes near one another in a safe area.

## First Steps to Making It Happen

A lot of preparation goes into this complicated event. Since September the Minnesota families have been hard at work raising funds by selling egg rolls, making and selling chocolate truffles, and organizing a recent media (books, music, games/puzzles) garage sale.



Meanwhile, Rosa, supported by past YCE participants and PML Nicaraguan board members, interviewed exchange applicants and selected members of the new group. The youth need to bond in a relatively short amount of time.

They have shown their full commitment, meeting every Friday evening to plan activities and a cultural presentation. Each week a different family hosts the gathering, so group members can get to know one another. This familiarity was helpful when each youth and one adult family member voted for the two chaperones to accompany the group to Minnesota.

### **Victory: Visas!**

The teens raced to get passports and complete tedious applications for their US visas. Although the US Consulate denied interviewing them as a group, PML was fortunate in getting them individual appointments as an extended “family.”



The participants practiced mock interviews to prepare for the daunting consulate visit.

Because they are minors, both parents were required to attend. A full bus travelled two hours to Managua on April 1. Thankfully, they all received a visa to enter the US at the end of June.

### **Giving Back to the Community**

Each Saturday the Nicaraguan teens work toward fulfilling their commitment of 125 service hours. Their first volunteer activity was a clean-up of the neighborhood park. They are also petitioning the neighborhood association and city to repair and maintain the lighting of that park, so that it can be used at night.

Another weekend the families organized a delightful activity fair for Casa



Jacinto y Francisco—a Catholic educational institution for children at risk. The youth set up stations with games, face-painting, and of course, piñatas. Parents organized food and materials. It was such a fun event they plan to hold a similar event in San Carlos in the future.

### The First Encounter

During a February YCE family preparation meeting in Minnesota, the teens “met” through Skype, speaking a mix of Spanish and English with lots of nervous laughter. Everyone is very excited to meet in person this summer.



### PML BOARD UPDATE

## Introducing Kristie Hennig



PML's newest board member, Kristie Hennig, brings with her long-standing passion and expertise for building partnerships between Minnesota and Central America.

### Why did you want to serve on this board?

I have been interested in Central America for as long as I can remember. While I haven't traveled to Nicaragua yet, the work PML is doing there resonates deeply with me. For the past fourteen years, it has been my joy to lead accompaniment trips of youth and adults to Guatemala and El Salvador, and to connect suburban families in Minnesota with urban and rural students in El Salvador. I am intrigued by the prospect of accompanying Rosa, the OMEGAS, and board members here in the shared work of strengthening our communities.

## **How do you see PML changing the people we reach in Minnesota?**

International travel can be fun and interesting, even life-changing. Hosting visitors from other cultures and walks of life can be heart-changing. Those of us in the Bold North who have the means and opportunity to travel and to host visitors are primed for transformation. When we visit with our hearts and minds open, we resist becoming tourists of poverty and instead make connections that are deep and strong and world-changing.

## **What are your hopes for the future of PML?**

Given the challenge of the recent violence in Nicaragua, my hope is that trips to Nicaragua will resume soon, as these experiences for Minnesotans are a wellspring of activism. There are many groups in our state working in Central America. With its long history, PML could serve as both a resource and a beneficiary to like-minded efforts.

## **What do you think you personally bring to the board?**

I speak Spanish. My first career was as a teacher of English as a second language. I have friends from many places in the world. I am passionate about the soul-deepening that can happen when people of different cultures invest in one another. And I have a wealth of contacts in Minnesota who share my commitment to embracing the whole fascinating world that is our home.

## **What do you most want people who visit PML's website to know?**

Project Minnesota Leon is an organization that seeks to share power, to connect, to beat swords into plowshares for the sake of a more inclusive, peaceful world raising up everyone's gifts and shouldering challenges across cultures. That is a beautiful thing.

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### TIMELINE UPDATES

## **Learn about Nicaragua's Ongoing Conflict**

BY ELIZABETH MOREIRA

Sign up for monthly updates on the political situation in Nicaragua. Elizabeth Moreira will prepare the updates drawing on English and Spanish language, international online newspapers, NGO reports, and other sources.

**To subscribe**, send an email to [minnesotaleon@gmail.com](mailto:minnesotaleon@gmail.com).

¡QUE VIVA, NANCY TRECHSEL!

## Honoring Nancy Trechsel

BY ELIZABETH MOREIRA

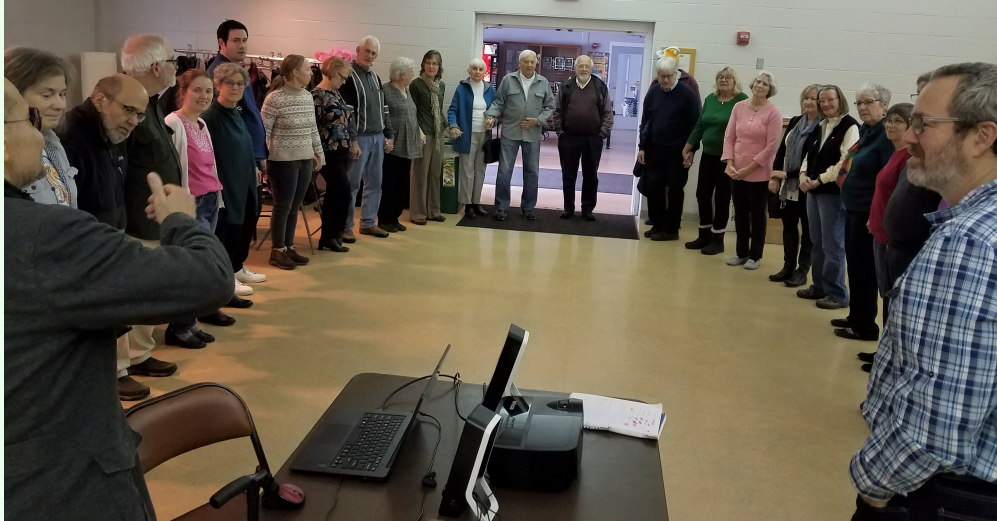


Thirty people gathered in Minneapolis on Sunday, March 17, to honor Nancy Trechsel's many years of commitment to Project Minnesota/León. Nancy passed away peacefully in December at the age of 90 at her home in Rockford, MN.

The gathering, at Pearl Park Community Center in south Minneapolis, was attended by people involved in or supportive of PML since its beginnings as well as in more recent years. Nancy's daughters Laurie and Lise and son-in-law David attended.

### Fond Remembrances

Some of the attendees had never met Nancy and knew her only by her reputation: a consummate, tireless volunteer who provided the backbone of PML's work through the 1980s, 1990s, and into the 2000s. Two of the younger attendees fondly remembered playing as children at Nancy and Hans's house with their many animals while their parents attended PML meetings.



In a large circle, everyone shared their memories of Nancy. Some longer commentaries were given by Nancy's daughter Lise; former PML León coordinator Rosanne Fischer; and the first PML coordinator and León director, Elizabeth Moreira, and her husband, Jorge Moreira, who gave their perspectives on Nancy's great leadership. Several people mentioned the integral part Nancy's husband Hans played in providing transportation and loyal support to Nancy throughout the years.

### “Neighbors to Nicaragua”

The group viewed slides, photos, and parts of the mid-1980s PML video, “Neighbors to Nicaragua,” in which Nancy appeared in several segments, including the dedication of a classroom and footage of Nancy batting at a piñata at the celebration. The half-hour video can be viewed on a private YouTube channel; you may request to view it by contacting Elizabeth at [minnesotaleon@gmail.com](mailto:minnesotaleon@gmail.com).

The outpouring of affection and admiration for Nancy’s work with PML was evident throughout the afternoon, and her optimism and energy has inspired people both in Minnesota and León ever since. A memorial service for Nancy will be held on Saturday, May 11, at Wayzata Community Church. The family would like memorials to be given to Project Minnesota/León.



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