

Nicaragua Scholarship Project

February 2008



Country and town Profile

Location and Population: Nicaragua is located in Central America, south of Honduras and north of Costa Rica. The Pacific Ocean lies to the west of the country, and the Caribbean Sea lies to the east. Nicaragua has a population of 5,570,129.

All of the scholarship students are from the northern region of Nicaragua, outside of the town of **Condega**. Condega is located in the North-Central mountains or highlands. This is an upland region away from the Pacific coast, with a cooler climate than the Pacific Lowlands. About a quarter of the country's agriculture takes place in this region, with coffee grown on the higher slopes. Oaks, pines, moss, ferns and orchids are abundant in the cloud forests of the region.

Condega is a municipality in the Estelí department of Nicaragua. It has a population of approximately 9,000 people. The students live in many different small villages along the river, Piré. These villages range from about 10-30 kilometers from Condega.



Map of Nicaragua



(2007 est.).

Economic Situation: Nicaragua is the second poorest country in the western hemisphere (Haiti is most poor).

Tourism in Nicaragua is booming. It is currently the second largest industry in the nation. Over the last 7 years tourism has grown about 70%. The growth in tourism has also positively affected the agricultural, commercial, and finance industries, as well as the construction industry. Despite the positive growth throughout the last decade, Nicaragua remains the least visited nation in the region.

Crops: Main crops include, beans, coffee, bananas, corn, sugar, and tobacco.

Forty eight percent of the population in Nicaragua live in poverty (2005 est.), unemployment is 5.6%, and another 46.5% are underemployed

Educational Situation: In 1980, the overall illiteracy rate was 50.3%. A major campaign was launched, reducing that rate to 12.9%. In 2005, about 7% of Nicaraguans held a college degree. Public schools are free, but many children in rural areas (like outside of Condega) are not able to attend because of financial reasons.

Websites with more info about Nicaragua:
<http://www.nicaragua.com/destinations/condega/>
<http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nicaragua>



How the Scholarship Project Began

I began my Peace Corps experience in September 2000. In December, our training had ended and I was placed in the town of Santa Teresa, Nicaragua. The town is about 10 kilometers from Condega, in the northern region on Nicaragua.



Even though my training was to be an agricultural volunteer, I quickly realized my time there could be better spent working on a variety of projects, instead of solely agriculture. I came to learn that there was no high school in Santa Teresa, and the closest high school was a 10-kilometer bus ride costing the equivalent of fifty cents each way. They said very few students continued to study past sixth grade because they could not afford the costs of the bus, food, matriculation, uniforms, and the like. The cost for one year of school was around \$100 per student. It immediately sparked my imagination about how I might add to my Peace Corps experience and, more importantly, make a lasting difference in Santa Teresa.

I worked with another former volunteer, Brady Hamilton, who had lived in the village before me, and we had an idea. Why not look for donors in the United States and elsewhere to "adopt" a local student for their five years of high school? We decided to create a scholarship project. The donor would pay \$100 for each of five years and would exchange letters throughout the experience with their student, creating a vivid cultural link as well as a once-impossible opportunity to deserving children who just want to be able to look for a job once they've graduated, read and write well, and possibly make enough money to help their families.

The Santa Teresa scholarship program has grown immensely from our first year, when we received 30 applications from local children. We receive new applications each year, and continue to sponsor each child for all five years of their high school studies. As a condition of the scholarship, the awardees are obligated to do 10 hours of community service each semester, in order to improve the lives of others through everything from reforestation to tutoring. I'm so proud of the positive effects I've seen firsthand that our little project has had in Nicaragua.

It's also made a difference for the scholarship donors, as well. I returned home to Seattle after the first year our project began in 2001 to visit my family and friends. I had the opportunity to talk with many of the people who began donating that first year and felt a thrilling sense of accomplishment after hearing how excited they were when they received letters and photos from students they were supporting. Many donors admitted that before they got involved with the project, they had no idea what people in Nicaragua were like -- their food, homes, landscape, economic situation. They loved that this project had provided them with an opportunity to see far beyond their own backyards.



As word spread amongst Santa Teresa and surrounding towns, I saw the sadness of those who were not selected for scholarships. We began to brainstorm about how to bring high school teachers to the community of Santa Teresa. Why not give an opportunity to all the students instead of a lucky handful? With the determination of the community residents, they convinced the government to start a high school in Santa Teresa, which now has a public high school for 1st through 3rd year. They hope to add the addition 2 years of high school soon.

I feel I was in Santa Teresa for a reason, and I think I have found it. Nicaragua is a culture of unconditional love, with warm-hearted, humble people who opened their homes and hearts to me, fed me, and comforted me. I feel happy I have had a chance to give something back to them.

This project has more than fulfilled my expectations, and I never imagined I would continue to work with it today, nor that our students would be attending college. It is because of all our generous sponsors that this project keeps going, and growing successfully. THANK YOU!! And from all of the kids and our coordinator, Elisa, in Nicaragua: MUCHAS GRACIAS!!!

Sincerely,
Jessica Neff

Scholarship Project Details*

Number of students who have participated

2001-Present: **>60**

Number of students who have graduated

2005: **8**

2006: **7**

2007: **4**, plus 1 student who graduated and continued into college



Number of students in college:

2007: **7**

Number of Sponsors and students receiving scholarships

2002: N/A

2003: **35**

2004: N/A

2005: **35**

2006: **36**

2007: **28**

2008: **33**

Number of schools participating

Highschools: **5**

Colleges: **4**

**Numbers reflect information as of February 2008.*