

Group Helps Create 'Oasis' at La Chureca

By Sam Jacoby

Nica Times Staff

MANAGUA – Tucked deep inside La Chureca, Managua's sprawling municipal dump, the Los Quinchos children's center is an unlikely oasis in a desert of filth and desperation. A rare source of hope where little is to be found, the center provides basic services to a handful of the hundreds of children who live and scavenge within the 40-hectare landfill.

Outside of the center's brightly painted walls, trash extends in every direction. A haze of ash and smoke from burning rubbish drifts upward toward the swirling vultures overhead. Stooped double in the heat of the day, slowly moving figures pick through the refuse.

"Plastic, paper, copper tubing, wire, cardboard, bits of metal, everything gets recycled," says Lillian Hall, the Managua Coordinator of ProNica, an aid organization that helps fund the Los Quinchos' program.

Hall has been living and working in Nicaragua for nearly 25 years, and has seen the ebb-and-flow of the country's fortunes firsthand. Arriving first in 1982 as a recent college graduate, she returned permanently two years later. That has given her a broad perspective on the way in which foreign aid has affected one of the poorest countries in the Western hemisphere.

"It's easy to be in solidarity during wartime, the injustices are so clear," she says, referring to the influx of eager revolutionary-minded foreigners in the 1980s. "Once it gets more complicated, people lose interest. No one is interested in boring old poverty."

ProNica focuses on the less-glamorous aspects of international aid: small-scale, long-term involvement with sustainable, poverty-related programs. Originally, the group sent direct aid from the United States – 16 shipping containers through the mid-90s – though focus has since shifted toward supporting organizations that are already in operation on the ground.

"We work as much as possible with existing Nicaraguan groups," Hall says. "They submit proposals, and when we have the money, we fund most of them. It tends to give us the most bang for the buck"

This call-and-response model of operation sends ProNica's support in diverse directions, though mostly toward groups that work with women and children; a beauty school in Managua and a day-care center in the northern department of Matagalpa are both grant recipients.

The Los Quinchos program, which operates in several different sites, is one of the largest of the organizations that ProNica helps fund.

The La Chureca center, established in

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Antonio Aragón | EFE

Surviving: In the middle of La Chureca, a sprawling landfill that serves as a desperate means to survival for hundreds of impoverished people, there is a children's center that offers hope that some will be able to overcome their surroundings.

'Rosita' Sexual Abuse Case Repeated

By Tim Rogers

Nica Times Staff

MASAYA – Four years after the women's movement rallied to defend the life and rights of an impregnated 9-year-old rape victim known as "Rosita," the same tragedy has repeated itself, only this time it's the women's movement that's being called to blame.

The Ministry of the Family, Adolescence and Youth (Mifamilia) has warned that if an investigation reveals that the Women's Network against Violence was involved in covering up subsequent sexual abuse of

Rosita, the women's organization could be processed criminally as accomplices.

Rosita, now 14, is again pregnant after allegedly being raped by her stepfather, Francisco Fletes, who is facing criminal charges in Masaya. It was also recently made public that she already has a 19-month-old child, which some also suspect is by her stepfather's doing.

Rosita's mother filed a police report July 31, accusing her husband of raping and impregnating her daughter. She claims she found out about the abuse 10 days earlier, when Rosita confessed the relationship to

her during an argument. Rosita allegedly told her mother that Fletes was now her man, and to leave them alone.

Police arrested Fletes in Masaya July 31, several hours after the police report was filed. But due to a technical mistake in the prosecutor's accusation, a judge released Fletes Aug. 2.

"I didn't know this was the Rosita case when the police brought him in," an exasperated judge Leonel Alfredo Alfaro told The Nica Times this week in his office in Masaya. "The police just brought in some guy in

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Energy Crisis Worsens, Blackouts Extend

The energy crisis was exacerbated this week following the shutdown of the Santa Barbara hydroelectric plant for a past-scheduled repair, leading to prolonged daily blackouts that reportedly lasted up to eight hours in some parts of the country.

The Santa Barbara plant, part of the state-owned Hidrogesa, had been waiting for the Generadora Occidental (Geosa)

plant to finish its repairs and come back online before shutting down, but the other plant failed to meet its deadline, resulting in both plants offline at the same time. Geosa is now reporting that the repairs should be completed by Aug. 25.

The plants that are operating are producing well below their output potential, leading to an energy crisis of around 120 megawatts, or approximately 20% of the country's energy demand.

The increasingly dire situation led to an emergency meeting Aug. 17 between the

energy sector and the Ministry of Energy and Mines, during which the two sides agreed to negotiate the purchase of an additional 20 megawatts of energy from Guatemala to partially alleviate this week's crisis.

Nicaragua's energy crisis has resulted in three- to six-hour rolling daily blackouts across the country for more than two months. The government estimates that the energy deficit will be resolved by the first trimester of next year, when new plants come online.

–Nica Times

Center Helps Establish Order out of Chaos

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2002, is a relatively recent addition to the suite of children's homes that the program administers, all of which provide basic services and counseling to homeless, drug-addicted and abandoned youth.

Most of the 45-50 kids the La Chureca center serves live within the dump itself, though a few have homes just outside. Some don't have homes at all, says Vicente Ramos, the center's director.

"These are kids who have health problems and respiratory issues, who are addicted to glue or have been injured," Ramos says.

Such problems are near-universal in the landfill, though it's hard to tell that from the children's smiling faces.

Stomping gleefully in the half-filled concrete pool and chasing each other across the dusty lawn, the children cut the air's stale heat with cheerful giggles and shouts. The harsh reality of the dump is hardly visible over the center's walls, higher than most of the kids' line of vision.

"Zalinda wanted to create an oasis for these kids," Halls says, referring to the Los Quinchos founder, Zalinda Rocca.

Since Rocca founded the organization in 1991, it has grown from a single residential farm in San Marcos to a staged series of homes that bring kids out of the streets and into supportive healthy environments. The organization even administers its own small soccer league.

Ramos proudly displays a pair of gleaming trophies on a shelf inside of the dark kitchen where lunch is prepared. "We were the league champions in 2005 - The Tigers," he says.

Despite its success, just half of the students enrolled in the La Chureca center are able to attend school. To try to make up for that shortfall, the center offers basic classes in math and reading, as well as teaching basic trades that may offer the kids a way out of the dump's destructive economic cycle.

"We teach the younger kids painting, and the older ones learn how to weave hammocks," Ramos says.

He pulls out a box of half-finished swatches of fabric, the work of budding weavers.

Twelve-year-old Farlei Meléndez shows off his skill, deftly adding a few more rows to the bright blue-and-red design he is working on. He has been coming to the center for two years, and though he hasn't woven a full-size hammock yet, he hopes to give it a shot soon.

"I'll be able to sell that one outside of the dump," he says hopefully, not pausing to look up from his work.

When lunch and classes end, the children



Courtesy of Lillian Hall



Courtesy of Lillian Hall

Committed: Longtime activist Lillian Hall (left) came here in the 1980s, when solidarity with Nicaragua was sexy. Two decades later, she is dedicated to helping impoverished Nicaraguans at the Los Quinchos children's center (right).

scatter back to their homes. A dozen kids pile into the back of Hall's SUV for a quick ride. "I guess I'm the school bus today," she jokes.

Striving for Sustainability

La Chureca, with its grim, high-impact imagery, is a hot-spot for international aid and hosts a number of support programs. Many of those, however, are associated with annual fund-drives; the groups come a few times a year but don't usually stick around for long, Ramos says.

"They used to serve the kids breakfast at a church near here," he says, though that program disappeared some time ago. "Lack of funding probably," he adds with a shrug.

Erick Sánchez, a staff therapist at the Filter House, a Los Quinchos home near Managua's sprawling Mercado Oriental, is similarly skeptical.

"Groups come in for a week, maybe two weeks. Medical brigades stop by for a day, and then they're gone," he says. "And the kids? The kids are still here."

The work of Los Quinchos and ProNica is painstaking and often disappointing. For every success story, there is a failure.

The scope of the task is enormous. By some estimates, there are several hundred thousand street children in Nicaragua, mostly in Managua. The problem requires intervention at a higher level, though little has been forthcoming.

"I haven't seen a government that helps us to address this social phenomenon," Sánchez says. "In seven months, the government (of President Daniel Ortega) has not even spoken to us. They don't have any interest."

From Hall's perspective, the answer to Nicaragua's persistent problems stem from global issues outside of the country's control. "Nicaragua is an impoverished country, not a poor country," Hall says. "It is a country that has been made poor by decades, centuries of exploitation."

Educating the World

Educating others about the political and economic realities of the country is one of the organization's focal points. Hall frequently hosts visiting delegations of students and activists, a role that she perceives as one of ProNica's most important duties.

"A huge component of what we do is edu-

cation, especially now," she says. "Bringing young people here and telling them the story of Nicaragua."

Rick Ellis, a professor at Washburn University in Kansas, brought a group of his students to visit ProNica's projects last summer. Instead of diving straight into volunteering, they spent a few days learning about Nicaragua's history.

"It is essential that students understand their service work within a social context," Ellis said in an e-mail after returning to the United States. "One of the students on the trip said that she felt more committed to working to end poverty at home than before."

That sentiment echoes Hall's message.

The challenges that Nicaragua faces are intimately connected to the world at large, she says. Realizing change may be far easier than many think. Making the trip to Nicaragua isn't even necessary.

While one can do a great deal working with the children of La Chureca, volunteers may be able to do as much, perhaps more, back in their home communities.

"Stay home. Lobby congress. Write letters. We can't do those big things," Hall says. "That needs to happen at home."

For more info, visit www.pronica.org. ■

Venezuela's Chávez Presents Plan for Broad Reforms

CARACAS - Venezuelan President Hugo Chávez, a close friend and influential ally of President Daniel Ortega, last week presented his country's National Assembly a package of constitutional reform measures, the most significant of which is a proposal to eliminate presidential term limits.

The proposed overhaul would modify 33

articles of the 1999 Constitution, addressing "political, social, economic, military and territorial" aspects, Chávez said in an address to lawmakers Aug. 16.

Another of the proposed reforms seeks to extend the presidential term from six to seven years.

The unicameral National Assembly, which consists of 167 members, all of whom are Chávez allies because the opposition boycotted the December 2005 legislative elections, must hold three rounds of

debate on the reform plan before bringing it to a vote.

If approved as expected, the constitutional revisions would then have to be put to the voters in a referendum.

Chávez has called on business leaders to work together with the government to build a "socialist economy."

The Venezuelan President also said his proposal will give constitutional status to "popular power" - the thousands of "communal, worker, student, campesino coun-

cils" that have been set up under the current administration - with the aim of "deepening participative" democracy.

Critics of the Ortega administration in Nicaragua warn that Chávez is also setting the tone for proposed changes to come in Nicaragua, by promoting the establishment of "citizen councils," eliminating presidential term limits and moving the economy toward socialism, while using a populist and inclusive rhetoric.

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