

## **Emma Burbridge (Social and Political Sciences) – Nicaragua, 2010**

After being involved in charity work for the past three summers I expected I would look forward to a relatively more relaxed and uneventful summer this year. However, I went along to a Church service around Christmas time and there was a guest speaker from ‘Seed International Fund Trust’ (SIFT) talking about the charity’s upcoming trip to Nicaragua; as soon as the service finished I found myself eagerly asking “Where do I sign up?”, and that was the end of my “relaxed and uneventful summer”.

When I returned home from the service I went immediately to SIFT’s website ([www.seed-trust.com](http://www.seed-trust.com)) and read how “almost half of Nicaragua’s population are below the poverty line; half lack access to safe water, illiteracy is still high, and because of civil war a whole generation was unable to attend school”. These are the kind of statements we so often see splashed on newspapers and flashed on TV, but only for the eye-witness can they hold any *true* sense of reality; until you have immersed yourself in the heart of the situation statistics are undeniably alarming but they are equally just random facts and figures referring to millions of faceless people in a country somewhere across the ocean. This is one of my main reasons for participating in charity-work: so often we as Westerners distance ourselves from the trouble overseas and the endless spiel of facts and figures has rendered us numb to the truth and implications of such situations; I believe it is highly important to appreciate what is going on outside our Western bubble and, for me, there is no better way to do this than to go and experience it for yourself.

Our time in Nicaragua was split between three places: Managua (the capital city), Ometepe (an island formed by two volcanoes) and Bluefields (Nicaragua’s chief Caribbean port). I was really grateful to be able to experience the different characters of these three places and to participate in the array of projects underway in each. Our first stop was ‘The Hogar de Fe Orphanage’ run by Ramiro and Conchita in Managua; it is one of the few orphanages left in its area after a Government initiative to replace Orphanages with foster homes. Hogar de Fe has been deemed to be doing too good a work to be closed down. Through charity support it houses 31 children all of whom are being educated or put through vocational courses; furthermore, it is now starting a new project where it hopes to move mothers (where children still have them) into the orphanage so that the mother-child relationship can be maintained; allowing the mother to work in the daytime whilst her child is cared for and then return at night to resume her parental role. Our job was to run activity days for the children including dance, sport and craft sessions; whilst the children are never short of a friend their contact with adults is limited and so activity days like those led by

SIFT are vital to ensure children have good adult role models, that they are engaged with, receive focused attention, and are given quality time to build relationships.

We also participated in a more practical project at the Orphanage to gravel a path which had become dangerously muddy in the rainy season; this was hard, physical work but also an interesting contrast to our work during the day with the children.

After working at the orphanage we travelled by boat to Ometepe; it had a completely different feel to Managua- the people seemed far more relaxed whilst the scenery was vibrant and breath-taking. We stayed in the shadow of a volcano in what was to be our most basic accommodation: the rooms were partially roofed and our nights filled with the noise of bats, beetles and the sight of fireflies! Our main job here was to build a model allotment: we were told how the people of Ometepe had got into the mindset that they were so poor they could only afford to eat rice; SIFT wants to change this and hopes the allotment will inspire many families to introduce more fruits and vegetables into their diets. We cleared a large area of land, built a fence and planted seeds over a number of days before visiting the families the allotment project is aimed at. It was really wonderful and humbling to visit the families and to witness and experience their way of life first hand and also gave me an opportunity to practice my Spanish (I had taken some lessons before the summer).

Through the fundraising we undertook before travelling to Nicaragua we were able to compile health packs (with toothbrushes, toothpaste, soap and flannels) to give out to families and we also took stationary for the children, which was really gratefully received. Whilst the allotment project filled most of our time we also visited a feeding programme which runs weekly and provides nutritionally enhanced milk for babies and young children; the children are also given short lessons and play games.

Our last project in Ometepe was to paint a medical clinic, which was set up by SIFT to provide basic healthcare for the local families- it is only a small building and one which is in constant use and in need of a bit of TLC! Unfortunately I had a bout of illness at this stage of the trip so was useless physically but managed to put myself to good use by playing with the children who lived opposite the medical clinic- they even managed to get me up on my feet and playing rounders!

We had a day off whilst in Ometepe which we spent swimming in Lake Nicaragua and trekking up to a beautiful waterfall. One sight during this day remains strong in my memory: we were travelling in our truck on the way to the waterfall when we saw a man lying on the roadside in the midday sun; we stopped to see if he was ok but got no response.

A car passed by and told us to “leave him; he must be drunk, it happens all the time here”. We left the man with some water and shade but we also left with a sense that this man represented many of the problems of Nicaragua- from political and financial instability to emotional disorder. It was hard not to have a feeling of helplessness, but I was reminded that it’s impossible to do *everything* for *everyone* and that major changes aren’t going to happen overnight. Our projects aimed to show people that we cared but also hoped to motivate and encourage them to help themselves; I strongly hope the importance of this message is something which the man on the roadside will come to learn.

After leaving Ometepe we boarded a 12-seater plane and headed to our final destination: Bluefields. Here we visited the local school to run activities with the children there, but our main project was to hand out food parcels. I found this one of the hardest tasks; the area we covered was a dirt track leading to a rubbish dump, lined with wooden shacks and home to large families. SIFT supports the families with the greatest needs, and these were the families we were to deliver food parcels too; however, poverty is on a different scale to that found in England and it was clear to me that every family had its own desperate needs. I found it hard that we couldn’t stop at every house, but the fact that we couldn’t reinforces the need for others to get involved and for more projects such as SIFT’s to be established; a personal challenge but equally a challenge to society at large.

As we drew closer to the rubbish tip we found a girl no older than 14, hidden by mounds of rubble, who told us she chips rocks into small stones, all day everyday in order to afford food for her family. This was a striking image, especially when compared to that of the average English 14 year old that has the privilege of being educated and then is able to come home and spend time with his family and enjoy the luxuries of television, computers and console games...

We ended the trip with a visit to the top of one of Nicaragua’s volcanoes, ‘Masaya’. The was an amazing end to the trip and the splendour of the volcano alongside it’s destructive past and potential seems a fitting way to sum up the country- full of beautiful people and sights but equally devastation and desperation.

I am incredibly grateful for the support that Pembroke showed me in my trip to Nicaragua; the mark that I have left may be small but I hope that, through the continued effort of projects such as SIFT’s, progress may be made- both in terms of transforming Nicaragua’s living standards but also in transforming Western apathy.