Nicaragua from a Student's Perspective

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Nicaragua from a Student's Perspective

This past summer I was fortunate enough to travel to Nicaragua to take part in a study-abroad program entitled “The Psychology of Social Inequality.” The program was a six-week course that was divided into two parts. The first three weeks we were at Grand Valley studying several psychological theories that help to explain social inequality and the behaviors that traditionally go along with it. Then, for the next three weeks we went to Nicaragua to put our studying to use. We stayed on a college campus in San Marcos and took a course on the history of Nicaragua. But outside of the classroom is where we learned the most. In the towns and cities of Nicaragua we were able to see social inequality at its sharpest.

The people of Nicaragua have had their fair share of problems. They were ruled by a dictator for over forty years. Once they finally gained their freedom, they were subjected to violence and war by former members of the dictator’s National Guard. They have had to deal with a string of natural disasters and corrupt politicians. Unemployment is rampant and poverty is the norm. They are facing an economic crisis, which is being worsened by the huge loans from the World Bank that must be paid back.

This could be quite a depressing situation for the Nicaraguans, yet people are still working to improve their own lives, as well as the lives of others. As part of our trip we visited several non-profit organizations to see what they are doing to alleviate the social inequality. There is an organization specifically for women, called Pro Mujer, which works to give women an opportunity to become financially independent. Pro Mujer provides loans for women, and helps them to start their own small businesses. This is instrumental in closing the gap of inequality that exists between men and women, a gap that persists in many countries around the world.

We also visited the Jubilee House, a non-profit organization that was started by a group of Americans. It is based in a community that was established for refugees of Hurricane Mitch, a disaster that left the country’s
capital, Managua, devastated. The community is part of a larger city, Ciudad Sandino, with a population of 147,000 and an unemployment rate of 80 percent.

The Jubilee House worked with women in the community to start the first women's sewing cooperative in the free trade zone. It was incredible to hear the women's story—they built the factory themselves and organized it in such a way that all the workers have a say in how the company is run.

One of our last stops was at a coffee cooperative, called CECOCafen. The 1,200 small-scale farmers who contribute their coffee to this organization follow the guidelines for fair trade. The profits from the sales are invested in health care, housing, and schools in their communities.

For three days we worked on Ebenezer farm, a farm that is run by an organization that teaches people basic farming skills. Representatives from several different families receive training in organic farming and are taught how to properly raise and provide for small animals. Everything the farm uses is natural, which means that the families do not have to spend money to buy expensive farm equipment, tools, and supplies.

Going to Nicaragua was an incredible experience. There were times when I would forget that I was in a “developing” country. The capital of Managua has paved roads, expensive cars, and thriving businesses. There are obvious signs of wealth throughout the city. But when we were in the outlying towns, we could not escape the poverty. There were dirt roads with potholes that far surpassed any I had seen in Michigan. The power would frequently go out because there was not enough energy or money to keep it running. Houses were made from scraps of tin and were kept together with barbed wire. Trash littered the roads because there was no system for waste disposal. Children walked around without shoes and were beginning to show early signs of malnourishment.

It was easy to become frustrated and depressed there, but just when we would begin to lose hope, we would hear of a new achievement of the Jubilee House or we would see a business that had a Pro Mujer sign on the front. And we would remember that progress is being made, however slow it may be.