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Newsletter

Nutrition Project

Summary by Judy Heitzman, Friends of Esquipulas, Nutrition Committee Chair, swartsdoc@insightbb.com

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History

In 2004, a St. William delegation went to Nicaragua to visit their sister parish, Our Lord of Esquipulas Parish (Parochia de Nuestro Senor de Esquipulas-NSdE). They met a four-year-old child, Antonio, who was covered with open sores caused by malnutrition. After a brief treatment with vegetable juice by a dermatologist in Managua, Antonio's sores went into remission. Malnutrition grew here, in part, because commercial farming had destroyed land. The Nicaraguans wanted to develop alternative farming methods that would preserve the land, and minimize any health risks from toxic chemicals.

In 2005, while visiting St. William with a delegation, the NICA organic project manager invited a committee to come see the crops growing in the field of the recently started organic project. An effort started to provide work in Nicaragua rather than having to leave their families for 6-9 months at a time to find work in other Central American countries.

In 2006, 6-year-old Antonio died from malnutrition because he lacked access to vegetables and medical care. Later in 2006, St. William delegates visited Nicaragua. They visited the fields of the organic projects and family farmers. The project manager (Pablo) *presented an idea for a nutrition project*, and requested help with it. During their visit, members from NSdE and St. William met with SoyNica, the clinic doctor, and a local malnutrition specialist. Interested Nicaraguan community members were invited to nutrition workshops, and the St. William members prepared vegetables that were available in the local Nicaraguan market. Workshops were then held three per week in the campo, each with 40-50 people in attendance. Most attendees did not recognize the fruits and vegetables that were available in their own local markets.

Barriers to nutrition include loss of the ability and knowledge to farm. Much of this loss is contributed to war, natural disasters, and corrupt government. Poor people no longer grew food because they had no seeds, land, or fertilizer, and had lost farming information from previous generations.

In November 2006, Pablo's proposal, including a widespread nutrition education program, was submitted. The Nicaraguans recommended the project start by educating community *women* to grow, prepare, and teach their children to eat the food. These women also learned to prepare organic gardens, including worm farms and compost. Eligibility included families with children under six years of age. The poorest families were chosen for the initial nutrition project. The surplus crops were shared with neighboring families. Quickly, other families wanted to join the nutrition project.

The Nutrition Project today

Currently, the nutrition project includes 70 families, and serves over 600 people. Members use either their own or borrowed land for growing crops. They share surplus harvest. The cost for the nutrition program includes one salary for a full-time manager/trainer, plus seeds and fertilizer.

The clinic physician, routinely recording growth changes of children participating in this project, documents nutrition program success. Seeing the healthy development of their children encourages the community.

Johanna Cruz, Nutrition project participant shares insights via telephone

She lives about two hours away from town (when transportation is available) in the community Santa Maria. She has two children, Celine Karina (13) and Belma Esellia (3) and has been in the Nutrition With Vegetables project for two years. "The project is very beautiful and very good. It has helped give us the seeds; carrots, celery, cucumbers, cabbage, squash, onions. We have workshops on cooking and eating raw vegetables."

"Sometimes we sell some of the vegetables in the farmers market and of course we share with our neighbors"

There are eight families in their community and none of the children have lost weight since the project started. They are healthier and get sick less. The doctor comes every two months to weigh the children.

"We are able to harvest three times this year because they are irrigating; right now we are harvesting celery and carrots."

The oldest daughter helps her as well as her partner, Augustino. They work 2-3 hours a day and have learned to use vermiculture. It is about five minutes walk from house to garden and "not too hilly." Would it seem hilly to us? "Yes," she said. Editors note: I have seen it! Hilly is an UNDERSTATEMENT!

Leo Cisneros: Nutrition Project Coordinator

An Interview with David Horvath, dhorvath@fastmail.fm

He began working for the church in Esquipulas in 2002 as an announcer at the parish radio station. He started working for the Nutrition project in 2008. Leo has training as an agricultural engineer from the Agricultural University in Managua. Father Victor saw he was capable of working with these projects and hired him.

In the beginning of the nutrition project, it was difficult because people were used to growing vegetables with chemicals that are quicker and faster, but cause harm. Now women are able to grow vegetables, to feed their families and neighbors as well as to have some left to sell in the growers market. The primary focus is growing and consuming a variety of vegetables to improve the nutrition for the family, especially children. The women are trained and have skills on the theme of nutrition.

On Mondays the projects team comes up with a work plan for the week. His typical day is 7 am to 5 pm. He leaves in the morning for the campo and returns in the evening. He meets weekly with participants of the projects to talk about how to protect the ground and environment; not to use chemicals; and to use organic products in production. We are making alliances with other organizations including Farmer to Farmer and the Peace Corps.

His greatest challenge:

"To be able to change the understanding and attitudes about using organic methods. It is difficult to change the existing culture; cutting down forest is not in the best interest of the people.

So we go with the doctor to measure and weigh the children and we see that their conditions are improving."

Leo likes working in collaboration. A Peace Corps volunteer, Chris, has been a great addition to the team. He helps with translating conversations (like this interview) and has brought some new programs to the people, including a Peace Corps project called "better kitchens." Chris resides in one of the Nutrition project communities of El Porton. This gives Leo and Chris opportunity to work together.

What do you like about your work?

"I like the cultivation of plants and to have a relationship with the campesina people. I enjoy cultivating the land and growing things. I like to help and support the people who are poor and did not have the knowledge to grow vegetables on their land.

I am also working with the parish on spiritual aspects; working with 9 groups in the urban sectors. I also connect with the prayer groups, each having a different focus (Mary, charismatic, etc.)"

Editors note: Leo's work is ministry. He provides compassionate care to the women in the Nutrition program as well as to the parishioners in town.

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An Outreach Ministry of St. William Community

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