

## Newsletter, May 2009

### *Larry Shushan, PINCC Volunteer in Central America, Spring 2009*

When we arrived in Ocotal, Nicaragua, a city of 30,000 near Honduras, nothing had prepared me for my first experience working in a Third World or “developing” country. Vacations in Mexico years ago had given me a sense of being in a Spanish-speaking country whose people’s lives are steeped in their abiding faith. And I’ve seen rural poverty on my way to more upscale destinations. But Nicaragua has a different feel, like it’s locked into its current situation forever: With high unemployment and higher underemployment – and virtually no ability to generate economic growth -- Nicaragua is one of the poorest countries in the hemisphere.



The clinic where PINCC set up first was attached to the regional hospital serving the Nicaraguan “department” of Nueva Segovia. Dozens of women sat on rows of benches, sitting expressionless and waiting patiently for their turn, sometimes all day. Some had children with them, probably the only part of the experience that made my new temporary surroundings feel at all familiar. Children in Nicaragua are like children everywhere, and these kids had the same smiles, charm and twinkle in their eyes as any others. They were shy, they were precocious and they were precious, even as they were oblivious to

their lot in life and how it differs from that of children growing up, say, in my neighborhood.

Pat Sax, my neighbor of 20 years and, as co-founder, the most experienced PINCC volunteer, said it succinctly: “If you were born in the U.S., you won the lottery.” The people of Ocotal and Achuapa, Nicaragua – the other place we worked before moving to El Salvador – are beyond poor. Their lives though, as stuck in poverty as they are, appear to be marked by dignity, patience, grace and acceptance. If they know of something different, they reveal no longing; if they’re desperate – and Ocotal suffers from an unusually high suicide rate that included the son of one of the nurses *while we were there* – they hide it well from people like me, an American volunteer passing through.



Nobody complained as they waited. If they were afraid or impatient, frustrated or angry, embarrassed or uncertain, they didn’t show it. They waited, and then gratefully accepted their good fortune of being seen and, if needed, treated by a Nicaraguan doctor trained and supervised by Dr. Kay and her medical team. Then they went on their way, back to a way of life I am destined never to fully know.

These women do everything in their power to struggle and survive in a culture that is both matriarchal and full of *machismo* at the same time – a paradoxical mix that keeps them producing babies at rates unheard of in the United States, even as they serve as the backbone of their society.



Half of Ocotal's population is under 17, and many of the "women" at the clinic looked impossibly young -- until they periodically nursed the babies they were holding.

With 60 percent unemployment in Ocotal, the streets are full of people sitting around doing nothing, especially young men. Bullet holes from the revolution still pockmark local buildings, a stark reminder of the latest violent chapter in a place whose history includes 16<sup>th</sup> century Spanish *conquistadors* and, strangely, one of the earliest aerial bombardments, when the United States in 1927 attacked after Augusto Sandino (for whom the revolutionary Sandinistas are named) tried to take a U.S. base near the town.

But today, scores of Ocotal's women will live to see their children grow up because of PINCC's work. Their larger problems may continue, but facing a future of cervical cancer won't be one of their hardships.

In Achuapa, the trappings of the city couldn't be more distant. Isolated in the hills, reachable only by long, difficult dirt roads and as dirt-poor as anywhere in Nicaragua, Achuapa is a place where PINCC takes over a clinic run by Flor and Gladis, a local acupuncturist and herbalist, respectively, for a couple of days.

Quickly unpacking and setting up four exam / treatment stations, plus an equipment sterilization line under a tree out back, PINCC is ready to see patients after only an hour. Everything needed is brought in large suitcases organized based on years of such trips. In Achuapa, I continued shooting video and photos, handling computer records of patients, and I had my first experience sterilizing speculums, biopsy tools and cryotherapy tips – something entirely unexpected in my life.



Women came from miles on foot – some barefoot – to be seen. Early on the second morning, we found women awakening on the benches out front, having walked all night and having slept only briefly before dawn. They were seen first so they could walk back to their even more remote villages before dark.

This is an area of subsistence living, of men on horseback, oxcarts hauling wood for cooking, a few cattle being driven up the street in front of the clinic, and even the occasional stray sow wandering by. At the cooperative behind the clinic, workers use fans to prep tons of sesame seeds for oil extraction for the big retailer, The Body Shop.

Again in the waiting room, I see the same stoicism, patience and acceptance – and repeated thanks for the opportunity to be examined and treated *for free* to eliminate one path to an early death. As a native Spanish speaker and interpreter on the trip, my wife Maggie heard about the lives of the patients first hand on a very intimate level, collecting scores of medical histories, answering questions and

providing reassurance.

Our lives will never be the same. We have seen first-hand the tremendous need that PINCC so effectively serves.

The scale of PINCC's work – 500 women seen and treated in one trip -- is multiplied by sustainability. It's not just a buzzword: Nobody is seen unless medical training and patient education

happen during the same visit, creating ongoing work by local doctors and nurses after Team PINCC has moved on. On our trip, some 50 locals were trained.

We can't help feeling more humble and appreciative of our relative good fortune. We had never heard of Ocotal or Achuapa before, but we'll certainly never forget the warm, friendly and grateful people we met there.



## *PINCC Mission to El Salvador, March 2009*



I got to work with the PINCC team in Central America, in March 2009. I saw the determination and strength in these hard working rural women, their patience and gratitude towards the local doctors and nurses and the PINCC team. All their lives, they give to their families; mothers are the often the main providers, and grandmothers tend the young children while the parents work. The harshness of life, the acceptance of what is seen as normal in Central America is hard to describe, and even harder to accept when compared to my life. The more I saw, the more I became humble and grateful to see Kay and Pat's dedication and tireless efforts to bring care to these poor women. I saw the joy in a young woman's eyes when Kay told her that her precancerous lesions had been successfully excised, and now, 6 months later, she had not only a clean bill of health, but also the good news that she could still have children. It made all our efforts worth while!

This poem is dedicated to Sandra del Carmen, mother of 3 children and mother/grandmother of her 2 grand-children after her daughter died of pneumonia at the age of 19. The medication and hospital care that would have saved her daughter were too expensive.

A single tear  
in the eyes of a woman,  
Life has carved lines on her face.  
She talks to us of hardship  
illness, poverty and hunger.  
And yet she stands tall and strong,  
Facing the challenges  
With patience and grace.  
She is the strength of the family.  
She works tirelessly in the market and  
farms to augment the food on the table.  
She prays for opportunities for her young.  
A mother and grandmother  
she nurtures her family  
hoping for a better life for her children.  
Her work is never ending.  
And through all she has faith.  
Her eyes are full of wisdom  
To guide all around her  
With patience and grace.

Meggie Raeder

## *Dear Friends and Supporters,*

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PINCC has been working very hard this year, as the recent economy downturn has affected people all over the world, especially those who live close to the poverty line. We have had so many requests from many new places to bring our training and service to their communities! Sites in four new countries in Africa have asked us to come, and we have begun serving new areas in Central America as well. We have also completed the training and equipping of several clinics. Our program in Kisoro, Uganda is not only functioning independently, but has started sending its trained team out to surrounding villages, with a goal of seeing 3,000 women a year. We will be starting a new Uganda project, including 3 small towns, and new sites in both Kenya and Tanzania. We will be completing the training and equipping of the wonderful Matibabu site, in Ukwala, Kenya as well. Our team leaves for Africa on May 22.

We're also very excited about going to India for the first time this summer, to train a Mobile Hospital serving a large area near Hyderabad, with our volunteer Dr. Rhoda Nussbaum.

We were fortunate to receive a grant in October, to help us expand. We have two new Trip Administrators who can help take more teams to new places: Carol Cruickshank and Monica Odero-Winegar have brought their considerable expertise to helping us meet the global need. I've included letters from two of our volunteers in Central America, to tell you more about our recent trips.

Because everyone knows there is a financial problem afoot and some have been kicked quite hard, giving as much as you would like to your favorite charity (hopefully PINCC) might be a real strain this year. So we have a few suggestions:

1. Our telephone company (CREDO) is great, they answer the phone with a real live and local person after only a few seconds, they give 1% of what you pay plus the amount from rounding off your bill to the next dollar to 50 progressive charities (unfortunately not PINCC yet) which amounted to \$3,345,331 last year. So here's the deal: if you change your telephone company to CREDO they will donate \$100. to PINCC.
2. Enclosed in this envelope is S.H.A.R.E. card. If you use it at one of the stores listed on the bottom of the card, we will get 3 CENTS for every dollar you spend. And if you have friends or relatives that will or do shop at Lucky etc. we will be happy to send you more cards. Little bits can add up.
3. We are going to have a walkathon on August 29<sup>th</sup>. Enclosed is a sign-up sheet. \$15 (which most people can afford) will pay for one woman in the developing world to be screened for cervical cancer. If you can get 10 people to sponsor you at that rate, you will have raised \$150. for PINCC and gotten us some new donors. We will have music (and maybe a clown) as we walk around Lake Merritt. I hope you can join us.

So far, we've kept our heads above the waters of recession. I know we all have been affected, and must be a bit more careful right now. But I hope you will continue to give us your support, at whatever level is do-able for you. I want you to know that your donations are continuing to save the lives of thousands of women, in the poorest and most needy places. PINCC will survive, and with your help we won't have to cancel or delay any training programs in Africa and Central America.

Many thanks for your generosity, and for caring about women who need this help!

Sincerely,

Kay Taylor, MD, Director

