

PROJECT PROPOSAL FOR 100 PROJECTS FOR PEACE
Lewis & Clark College

INTIMATE VIOLENCE AND VISIONS FOR PEACE
IN EL VIEJO, NICARAGUA
working with Xochilt Clinic
in partnership with Proyecto Sonrisas,
USA and Nicaragua

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Our proposal for 100 Projects for Peace addresses the fundamental needs of family health, stability, and peace. Our aim is to build upon the vision and work of Xochilt Clínica, the community-run health clinic in El Viejo, Nicaragua, to foster greater knowledge, respect, and compassion for all people of the region.

GENERAL BACKGROUND

While economic and military conflict are often the headlines of international news about the developing world, another form of violence that rarely makes the headlines lies at the center of many families' lives. Domestic and sexual abuse is a daily reality for women and young people around the world. For many of the women in Nicaragua, not even their own home is a peaceful place. In Central America, poverty and lack of adequate healthcare and education further exacerbate these violent situations. Nicaragua is the second poorest country in Central America and currently more of its national budget is used to repay loans than to fund both education and healthcare.¹ These economic pressures and low levels of social support most severely affect women raising families.

In Nicaragua, one in every two women has been physically mistreated at some point by her husband or companion, and one in four women has been the recipient of physical violence during the last 12 months.² While historical cultural norms contribute to this violence against women in intimate relationships with families, in recent years it has become an even more egregious situation due to the spread of sexually transmitted infections. Social silence and lack of health education contribute to a high rate of sexually transmitted infections. In particular, HIV and HPV (due to its link with cervical cancer) are deadly consequences for the women and families of Nicaragua.

In 1999, members of a local banana workers union in El Viejo (in western Nicaragua) came together with the intention of providing gynecological care to women working in the banana plantations and formed the Xochilt Clinic. Since then, the Clinic has grown to provide general medical consultations for all people of the community as well as foster health and safety within every family in the region. Its vision includes a holistic understanding of healthy communities, reflected in their programs' focus on preventative care and public health education.

OUR PROJECT

The Xochilt Clinic has made tremendous strides in providing medical services to the people of El Viejo, and has identified a need for sexual health education for young people. As US citizens, we have experience and resources to provide opportunities for the young women and men of El Viejo to learn how to protect themselves, build healthy relationships with one another, and address sexual and domestic violence. The youth of El Viejo are at a critical juncture in their lives, able to turn the tide of intimate violence in their own relationships and build safe homes for future generations. In working with Nicaraguan social service organizations and utilizing creative initiatives, we will provide youth with crucial information concerning sexually transmitted infections (STIs), condom use, how to identify and address intimate violence, as well as healthy communication concerning sexual contact.

Elizabeth Fussell has been volunteering with Proyecto Sonrisas and the Xochilt Clinic for the past year.³ Through her experiences working with the El Viejo community this summer and continued correspondence with Berta Gomez, the Xochilt Clinic coordinator, Ms. Fussell has assessed critical areas of need where our project's support will be most effective. In summer of 2006, she learned that the community is located in a region of Nicaragua with the fastest growing rates for STIs. In her work organizing workshops with local health and youth workers, the need to address this

¹ Raúl Moreno, *CAFTA-DR y la Deuda Externa en Centroamérica*

² <http://www.undp.org/rblac/gender/nicaragua.htm>

³ Sonrisas is a non-profit NGO with headquarters in Boston, Massachusetts and Estelí Nicaragua. They are dedicated to improving the standard of living for children and women in Nicaragua by increasing their access to health care and education.

increase became evident, specifically the Human Papiloma Virus (HPV). HPV is sexually transmitted virus that is the primary cause of cervical cancer. Cervical cancer is preventable and treatable if detected early, and one part of our objective to provide the resources to make this possible at the Xochilt Clinic.

We view this project as our opportunity to continue to face these urgent challenges alongside the staff of the Xochilt Clinic as well as community members from the El Viejo Comision de Mujeres, El Viejo Movimiento Comunal, and a local banana plantation workers' union. In serving the present need of the community by providing crucial medical testing and health education as well as working to educate and empower youth concerning domestic and sexual violence, we envision a more peaceful life for the people of Nicaragua.

Violence against Women and Sexual Health Education

- This project will provide women with pap smears to help prevent cervical cancer through early detection and opportunity for treatment. Many local women have never had pap smears, which are the most effective method for detecting cervical cancer warning signs. This program will specifically be for women in outlying rural areas, who are at particular risk because of their lack of access to health services. We will fund pap smears for 700 women at a total cost of \$1750. The Xochilt Clinic and Sonrisas Inc. have sponsored these kinds of free exams in the past with women from the banana plantations. The clinic has found that these free exams, in addition to providing a needed health service, succeed in bringing people into the clinic who may not have previously been exposed to general medical information or other health and social services.
- Educational workshops will promote sexual health education and awareness of violence against women. These workshops will address three main systemic issues: maintaining sexual health, domestic violence, and sexual assault.
- Condom distribution and education about the proper use and the benefits of condoms.

Traveling Theatre Performances Initiative with Youth

The arts are powerful tools for presenting educational information concerning issues of violence and visions of peace. We will organize local youth groups in theatrical performances. Our efforts will be developed and facilitated alongside a Nicaraguan theater company in order to ground our work in the community and culture of the region. We will provide opportunities for youth to connect with issues of concern to them and to share their interpretation of these issues with their community. Specifically, this involves:

- Using creative processes to write and produce skits that explore how to address health and safety issues in the home.
- Establishing ongoing opportunities and resources for young people to continue community-centered education through the theatrical arts.

INCORPORATING OUR KNOWLEDGE: RETURNING TO PORTLAND

An essential component of our international service project is ensuring that the effects of our work continue after the summer ends and we return to the United States. We are committed to strengthening existing programs at the Xochilt Clinic to directly meet the needs of the El Viejo community. Our work builds on local models of organization, providing needed resources and creative inspiration that fit with Sonrisas' approach of supporting grassroots community work in public health. This project will help grow the Xochilt Clinic's programs, improving their capacity to continue fostering peace in the future.

An additional way to ensure the lasting effects of our work is to connect our experiences with the Portland and Lewis & Clark College communities. We will return home after our summer project in Nicaragua to teach and inspire other Portlanders in their peace work by sharing our experiences with health educators. We will give public presentations to groups who are interested in Nicaragua and international public health issues, including mission groups and students traveling and living abroad. Some potential audiences are nurses and medical students at Oregon Health Sciences University, medical workers, the Portland Central American Solidarity Committee, as well as Lewis & Clark College students and professors. We also plan to share our experiences with Peace Corps volunteers serving in Nicaragua, in order to educate them about current health issues in the region. This opportunity will allow us to exchange resources and learn about one another's projects so that we may broaden and enhance international peace work.