

INTIMATE VIOLENCE AND VISIONS FOR PEACE

IN EL VIEJO, NICARAGUA

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PROJECT SUMMARY

From June through September 2007, our group of recent college graduates spent the summer working with a community health clinic in El Viejo, a small city in the agricultural region of western Nicaragua. Xochilt Clinic (*so-cheel*) is run by leaders of the agricultural and service workers union, FETBASCH. The clinic was started in 1997 as a gynecological clinic for women working in the region's banana plantations. Since then, the clinic has expanded its focus and it now emphasizes holistic community health with a focus on preventative care and public health education programs. Today, the clinic provides general medical consultations for all people, it does health education outreach to surrounding rural areas, and it continues to serve as a focal base for union organizing. Our goal for this project was to build upon the vision and work of Xochilt Clinic, to further develop their sexual health education programs, general community health services, and outreach efforts to at-risk populations. Our original proposal was structured around providing pap smears to rural women, giving workshops on sexual health and healthy gender relationships, and developing a theatre program with local youth.

As our project developed, we decided to expand the scope of the paps screening program, transforming it into a holistic cervical cancer prevention program. We purchased an Electro-Surgery Unit for the clinic, and we networked with international cervical cancer organizations to assess the clinic as a future surgical site. To meet standards for surgical procedures, we performed small renovations to the exam room and purchased some supplemental surgical equipment. We also secured additional training for the clinic's doctors to safely utilize the Electro-Surgery equipment. Another significant change to our project was that the primary funder of the clinic, Trocaire, an organization in Ireland, was no longer able to fund neither the health programs nor the salaries for the doctor, rent or utilities. Trocaire continues to assist the clinic with their education programs. In light of these changes, we decided not to develop the youth theatre program, so that we were able to devote more energy and resources to the cancer prevention program and to help cover the basic financial needs of the clinic as they transition to other long-term funding sources.

In addition to the \$10,000 grant from the Kathryn Wassermann Davis Foundation, we received a supplemental \$2,500 from the Lewis & Clark College President's Office. The US-based nonprofit organization, Sonrisas, also provided support and guidance in non-monetary forms, throughout the design and implementation of this project. Also, in response to the expanding scope of our project, we initiated a private fundraising campaign, and have to-date raised an additional \$2815.

PROJECT RESULTS

Much of our project was successfully carried out as described in our original project proposal:

- Provided free pap smears and consultations to 300 women, most from rural areas outside of El Viejo.
- We worked with the clinic coordinators and medical staff to design educational workshops promoting sexual health education and awareness of the socialization of gender and gender relationships. We funded 24 workshops, in eleven communities with approximately 650 participants.
- We distributed 1,000 condoms and provided instruction in the proper use and benefits of condoms.

Aspects of our project changed as we grew to understand the needs of the community better. Though some of our programs changed, our overall goals remained the same, and we found new, more effective or more feasible means to reach them.

- We purchased an Electro-Surgery Unit for the clinic, which will allow the clinic to seal wounds and uteral ulcers, take biopsies to diagnose cervical cancer, and even remove cancerous growths.
- With additional aid from a fundraising campaign we undertook while in Nicaragua, we financed renovations to the exam room and basic expenses such as salaries, rent and utilities for three months.

Overall, we feel very satisfied with the results of our project. We met almost all of the objectives that we articulated in our proposal and we responded creatively to unexpected changes in the context of our project and created new objectives for ourselves along the way. We improved the long-term viability of the clinic by supporting them through a major funding transition and providing guidance and resources for them to successfully solicit new long-term funding. Our energy behind the cervical cancer program brought a much-needed piece of medical equipment to the region, which will improve access and affordability for critical health procedures to women who currently may be on a two-month waiting list for removing cervical cancer.

IMPLICATIONS

The broader context of our project is the cultural and structural violence that invades the homes of so many Nicaraguans. Another aspect of violence highlighted in our work with the FETBASCH union, is the effects of global trade and the pressures of international consumption and competition that affect the daily working conditions and economic health of many Nicaraguans. Injustices and structural violence in our global systems manifest themselves in the poor economic and physical health of communities and their residents, such as the banana and watermelon workers in the rural areas surrounding El Viejo. Though the impacts of our project can be difficult to measure against the pervasively violent backdrop, our efforts take a step towards peace. The stability and peace of families is rooted in their health and their healthy relationships with each other. Our efforts focused on education and communication as tools to promote understanding and respect, which are the foundation of peaceful relationships.

Because our project was designed to build upon the already existing infrastructure and programs of the Xochilt Clinic, the work of our project does not end with our departure from Nicaragua. The clinic will continue to serve as a community resource promoting women's health, respectful intimate relationships, and general health education. Through the workshops we funded, community liaisons and union leaders were provided opportunities to prepare and lead the workshops, empowering them to be able to continue educating their communities in the future. Other programs we supported, including the condom distribution and education as well as the pap smears and STI consultations, will continue to benefit these communities in the future through increased awareness of health risks and protective measures they can take. In addition, the clinic is now better equipped to coordinate paps and workshops after developing those programs this summer with us.

With our return to the United States, we will continue to support the clinic from a distance. We will give presentations in Portland, Oregon about the clinic's work and our project to share our experiences with our own community and to inspire others to engage in complementary international solidarity work. In addition, Ms. Fussell and Ms. McBride will continue to work with the clinic as board members of the non-profit, Sonrisas, Inc.

This project has taught us so much. We have learned overspending is easy, small amounts of money and simple tools have profound impacts when employed where needed, sexual health education is vitally needed, and people everywhere are beautiful, loving, and generous beyond belief.