

# 100 Projects for Peace Proposal

## Nagarote-Wesleyan Partnership

*Project Representative:* Jessica French Smith '09

*Group Participants:* Sean Corlett '07, Lorena Estrella '10, Nelson Norsworthy '10

Nagarote, Nicaragua. Population: 32,000. A small community located in the western lowlands of the impoverished country of Nicaragua. Nagarote, like most of Nicaragua, faces many hurdles to combat the ills of poverty: inadequate access to proper health care, low literacy and graduation rates, high crime rates, high drug usage, and low wages in sweatshop-like environments are just a few of them.

Like many communities in Central America, teen gang violence has been a problem in Nagarote, particularly in the poorest barrios. The Nagarote-Wesleyan Partnership (NWP) is addressing the issue of peace by helping to expand the successful Jeronimo Lopez Youth Project into other troubled barrios in Nagarote.

Jeronimo Lopez is one of the poorest, most isolated sections of Nagarote. In 2002, a census was taken and a needs assessment defined teen gangs, alcohol and drug abuse and violent crime as major problems. In response, our partner agency, the Norwalk Nagarote Sister City Project, created the Jeronimo Lopez Youth Project, a year-round after-school program designed to provide an opportunity for youth in the barrio to engage in productive activities instead of being out on the street. The project offers classes requested by the youngsters, including computers, English, tailoring, dressmaking, baking, hair styling, painting and photography, which often lead to employment opportunities. The youth also participate in community service projects, workshops on substance abuse, domestic violence, raising self-esteem, and AIDS and sexual health awareness. In a barrio of roughly 200 households, 150 teens are involved in the project and the youth who were once a serious problem are now actively improving their own lives and their community. None is using drugs or alcohol or involved with gangs or crime. The police report a significant reduction in the incidence of drugs and crime in the barrio. A recent survey revealed more than 30 graduates of the program had found jobs using the skills they learned. This is especially remarkable in an area with overwhelming unemployment.

The community service component of the project has been an invaluable tool for building self esteem and has had a profound impact on the entire community of Nagarote. In 2006, with

funding from a grant, sixty of the Youth Project youngsters created a tree nursery and planted more than 2,000 trees throughout poor, barren areas of Nagarote.

The Jeronimo Lopez Youth Project has had a lasting influence on participants, an influence that has already resulted in positive changes in the community. The program has been so successful that it needs to be extended to other equally disadvantaged barrios in Nagarote as a means of laying the foundation for a safer, more peaceful, and much more stable Nicaragua.

*Our goal for this summer is to expand the project to other neighborhoods in Nagarote by building a Community Center located in the heart of the city.* We firmly believe that this community center will help promote peace in the region by giving youngsters constructive activities as an alternative to gang violence. The Norwalk Nagarote Sister City Project has already raised the funds to purchase the land and the building. However, the building requires major renovation in order to function as an adequate classroom, and gathering space. Both our partner agency and the community of Nagarote support and anticipate our role in this expansion. *Over the course of 10 days this June we will partner with the Jeronimo Lopez youth and community members to begin the necessary renovations.*

The community center is needed in order to expand the Youth Project to other barrios. It will provide a central location accessible to all parts of the community, a permanent office space that doesn't move at the whim of each landlord, classroom space and a safe space for youngsters to get together and socialize. Currently sewing, tailoring, beauty, English, baking and art classes are taught outdoors and computers and photography in the sister city project's small office. They need space for classrooms that can house the sewing machines, oven, computers and art supplies. We believe that we can promote our education-based mission much more effectively and efficiently in this new space. The Community Center will provide youth from all over the city the opportunity to keep occupied and engaged, thus reducing crime, drug use, and gangs. We believe that the community center is necessary to expand the Youth Project into other neighborhoods. *The 100 Projects for Peace grant funds will be used to buy materials and supplies for the renovation as well as for our travel and lodging expenses.*

We believe in empowering the youth of the community. Their future is much brighter than it would have been without the Youth Project, and former participants return year after year to help. The cycle has started, and we believe that expanding our project will help create a more peaceful community and provide hope for the next generation in the city of Nagarote, Nicaragua.