

The Nagarote-Wesleyan Partnership (Wesleyan University)

Participating Members of the Nagarote-Wesleyan Partnership:

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1. **Project Summary:** Describe location, timeframe, participants, other funding involved, scope of work, and goals intended.

Nagarote, Nicaragua (originally the property of the Nagrandanos before Spanish imperialism) is a small city of 32,000 people in the Department of Leon, bordering Lago Managua and looking onto Volcano Mombotombo. Across the major highway from the center of town is Jeronimo Lopez (JL), one of most impoverished neighborhoods in Nagarote, whose community members have struggled against manifestations of marginalization and oppression including: gang violence, drug usage, low literacy and graduation rates, and inadequate access to health care and education. In response to the results of a 2002 census and needs assessment of JL, The Nagarote-Wesleyan Partnership's (NWP) sponsoring organization, The Norwalk-Nagarote Sister City Project (N/NSCP), teamed with community members to establish the Jeronimo Lopez Youth Project which supports the personal, social, physical, and intellectual development of at risk youth. Within the past five years alone, the Youth Project has grown to include more than 150 students from various neighborhoods who participate in: cosmetology, painting, tailoring, sports, baking, English, computer, and photography classes. These courses support and promote micro-finances, athletics, organized community service programming, an urban reforestation grant-initiative, discussions on the challenges youth face, and self-definition and expression.

The Nagarote-Wesleyan Partnership's (NWP) Project for Peace goal was to work *with* community members to make the Youth Project accessible to even more people and help continue to develop safe-spaces for youth to socialize and self-define. Originally, we planned to work toward this goal through repairing and improving a new community center that N/NSCP was in the process of pursuing; however, there were disputes over the title of the property and N/NSCP could not purchase the building. Therefore, we had to shift gears and figure out how to use funds in a way that stayed true to the spirit of the grant proposal without a new physical space.

In addition to the explicit goal of the grant, we wanted to continue to develop a partnership with Nagarote community members, a process which began in 2004 with the formation of the Wesleyan student group NWP. Prior to traveling to Nagarote this June and the March prior, members of NWP engaged in both formal and informal consciousness-raising sessions to discuss how to work against the popularization-fetishization of the U.S. and European "savior" activism (e.g. the "I am African" magazine campaigns) and develop international partnerships in the most non-paternalistic way. Considering the difficult dynamics involved in transnational partnerships and the specific problems with the land title of the prospective property, we decided that we would need the whole summer, at least, to use grant funds.

During early June 2007, four members of NWP began working on the Project for Peace in Nagarote. This first week was perhaps the most important of all summer as members began socializing, joking, laughing, and sharing stories—building a foundation for a partnership between Wesleyan and Nagarotean communities' members. In addition, NWP members interviewed over fifty people to find out how the Youth Project could be improved and what material aid and programming were needed to expand the Project and its sense of community. From these interviews, a list of purchases was created and then modified over the next two months during sustained dialogue and evaluation processes.

In July and August 2007, one member of NWP stayed in Nagarote to continue purchasing, managing the grant accounting and assisting N/NSCP during the transitional period between directors. The months' work included: helping to organize the rapidly growing Youth Project and its initiatives, beginning intra-organization evaluations, facilitating teacher and staff meetings, examining students' wants and needs, and communicating with the Boards in Nagarote and Norwalk, CT, USA. During this month, grants funds were used to purchase an electrical generator to maintain some sort of regular schedule during the seven hours of blackouts instituted by the nationally-contracted Spanish company, three computers to expand the course offerings, five guitars for a new music class requested by Project students, a volleyball net and balls for a new women's sport team, a television and stereo for use in Project classes and the N/NSCP preschool, two ovens and a refrigerator for class use and a possible meal program for Nagarote students, and a voice recorder for students to record their personal and local histories. Additionally, the grant funded: a memorable and morale-boosting trip for 60 people to Diriamba, Nicaragua to support the Youth Project's men's soccer team during their game, and the Youth Project promotion for over 200 students, friends, and family in celebration of participants' hard work and completion of Project courses. All of these purchases were suggested or approved by Youth Project members and directly relate to the goals and intentions of the 100 Project for Peace grant program.

Although the NWP Project for Peace is officially completed, the partnership should and will continue through the years to come.

2. **Project Results:** Self-evaluate the project; your assessment should enumerate what goals were and were not accomplished.

How do we define successes and failures in the realm of community organizing and collaboration if everything is a process? It is more effective and useful to examine and analyze the challenges of the process and where we are in relation to our goals of a partnership, expanding the Youth Project, and supporting young people.

So where are we in terms of developing a partnership between Wesleyan and Youth Project students? The idealistic goal of a partnership is one of the central focuses of NWP and perhaps the most difficult. We have had to ask ourselves, "How can we, college students of traditional academic institutions that often demand the otherization and temporal distancing of people of color and working class peoples, confront the influences and barriers of our world's economic and racial states?" In response to this awesome challenge, we began the implementation of the Project for Peace with interviews, hoping to hear truths and the advice of Project students about how to use grant funds. This process was difficult and most interviews were expectedly awkward and mechanical. However, as weeks and months progressed interviews seemed a little more genuine, a little less formalized, and a little more like effective exchanges of stories and ideas. But in order for this partnership to develop and grow, we must continue laughing, joking, communicating, and sharing over time, long after spending the \$10,000 100 Project for Peace grant. We must continue to be reflexive, examine how we are engaging neocolonial and paternalistic relationships and ideologies, and understand how to communicate more effectively and more humanly with other people.

And where are we in terms of helping the Youth Project become more accessible and effective in providing spaces for youth to socialize and self-define? Our original plan to repair a new community center fell through during disputes over property titles; so, we had to function within the confined, small and cramped space of the current office and work with students to spend funds in ways which support the development and organization of youth and youth agency. After formal and informal conversations with young people, we tied purchase material resources and plan programming according to students' ideas for Project expansions and needs. We can only speculate, however, on the usefulness and effectiveness of grant expenditures. But according to student feedback, morale and community dynamics have improved and most material resources have been used despite the 7-hour electrical blackouts and the financial restrictions of a not-for-profit non-governmental organization. The major challenge now is working with and building from the purchases, the new technologies, the trips and events to maintain and develop spaces for more youth to learn, to define and develop self-esteem, to organize, and to form constructive peer support networks. Through continued collaboration, NWP will be able to partner in this process to make sure that our efforts this summer have a valued impact.

3. **Implications:** What are the project's implications for peace? What are the future prospects for the project? What have you learned?

The 100 Project for Peace grant allowed us as NWP to further prove our commitment to youth and communities of Nagarote and the idea of partnership; we were able to begin to cement a relationship with Nagarote that will continue for years to come. By emphasizing and fostering active partnership through the Youth Project, the NWP and N/NSCP has been able to help youth empower themselves by providing networks of resources and developing safe spaces in which young people can grow and learn to self-define in positive, productive ways. The materials purchased and programming funded by the grant will be used to continue to support the youth and community in the classroom, on the soccer/volleyball field/court, and in everyday life. These new resources for self-empowerment, furthermore, will encourage Project participants to choose a lifestyle that promotes peace and positive community environments and connections. But aside from the physical, tangible purchases made with the grant money, the friendships and relationships that have been established (through stories, laughs, and tears) speak to the peace that is building and slowly transcending cultural and social barriers.

During the past months, we as individuals and as a partnership have grown. Most importantly, we have learned that community development is a non-linear process and that change does not happen overnight; processes take time, dedication and a willingness and openness to learn and experience with other people. As we widened and enabled means of communication, not only through interviews but through everyday interactions and exchanges, we were able to learn more about being human by being conscious of our personal histories and identities and remaining sensitive and open to others' stories. Acknowledging and responding to challenges (internal and external, direct and indirect to the Project) has been another invaluable realization as we had to practice flexibility, patience, and a determination not to lose sight of end goals.

Considering all of the experiences, insights, and reflections of this summer, last spring, and during the past three years, we believe that NWP has the great potential to grow and expand. Our dedication to travel, at the very least annually to Nagarote, is the most vital asset in the never-ending process of building and maintaining a healthy partnership. By continuously engaging with the Youth Project community in person, our relationships with people will expand and develop as years pass. As our partnership strengthens and bridges of understanding are constructed, peace within our communities will develop and become a central foundation from which to build. The 100 Projects for Peace Grant was a big step in what we intend to be an honest and serious relationship with Nagarote communities in establishing peace and working towards sustainable community organization. But in order to continue our partnership, there is the obvious need for funding. As NWP, we face the challenges of personal and campus fundraising, in addition to student loans and other financial obligations. We believe strongly in our mission to engage critically in rethinking international service and the possibility of partnership while offering tangible material assistance based on the self-identified needs of Nagarote communities. We hope that from our three-year commitment to the youth of Nagarote and our 100 Project for Peace we will be able to find support (financial, administrative, and peer) on and off the Wesleyan University campus.

