A San Diegan In Managua

An Interview with Lorraine Froeb

Lorraine Froeb is a 28 year old student and worker for Rebel Bakers. She is currently studying business and nutrition at Mesa College, holds a B.A. in Anthropology from UCSD, and has been interested in Central America for a number of years. While an undergraduate in 1979, she went to Guatamala on an independent weaving project and lived with a Mayan family in the Guatamalan highlands. Returning to the region six years later, she went to Managua from June 20 to July 20, 1985, to be there for the preparations for the sixth Anniversary of the Revolution celebrations.

Lorraine says, "Internally the greatest challenge facing Nicaragua is the economic crisis which all of Central America is suffering because of the strong American dollar and foreign debt crisis." She says that when posed with describing the major problems of the revolution, most Nicaraguans start by criticizing the U.S. government's support of the Contra war. As her Nicaraguan "host mother" put it: "Your country should think hard about changing its interventionist policies...because it is certain that thousands of Nicaraguans will die defending their national dignity..."

Q: Why did you go to Nicaragua?

A: My interest in Nicaragua stemmed from a trip I took to Guatamala for six months in 1979. It was during that time that the Nicaraguan insurrection was happening, and although I was very politically naive, I noticed how all the Guatamalans were glued to their radios the month before the insurrection. There was a great feeling that a very important event was happening in the Central American region; and there was a great joy and empathy for the Nicaraguan people and their struggle.

Since that time I've had a burning curiosity as an average American citizen to visit Nicaragua and see the revolutionary process first hand. I wanted to see how life was changing—what it was like to fight in the revolution, and what types of projects the Nicaraguans were undertaking to rebuild their society. I also wanted to renew my commitment to doing Central American solidarity work, and I felt that going to Nicaragua and bringing back first hand experiences would strengthen my resolve.

Q: Who did you live with?

A: I went with a language political studies program sponsored by a private American school called Casa Nicaraguense de Español, run by Americans and Nicaraguans. The language school placed us with families living in a Managuan barrio called Maximo Jerez—the barrio is being renamed Ricardo Su, after a martyr of the revolution.

My "family" was composed of a mother and her two children, one of whom was a 17 year old single mother with a 1 year old baby. They also had a huge extended family.The kids were in school, and "my mother" was in the military taking a leave of absence. She was well educated...you might say she was one of the intellectual vanguard of the revolution. She had been very involved with the Sandinistas during the insurrection and had to go underground for a year. She fled Nicaragua in 1978 and spent a year in Mexico. Since that time, she's worked within the military, holding the rank of lieutenant. She had studied in Cuba and was very interested in the revolutionary process. She was very interested in telling me about the progress the Sandinistas had made, and about the problems they were running up against, like the food shortages and the military draft.

Q: What about the food shortages? How are the Nicaraguans coping?

A: Basically, after the revolution, the government tried to supply basic items like corn, rice, beans and sugar at very low prices. One of the results of this was a lot of hoarding, which created mass shortages and a fear of shortages. My Nicaraguan mother told me how the Costa Ricans and Hondurans would come into Nicaragua to buy food because it was so cheap. To remedy the situation, the government is now rationing the items. Two or three times a week people go to a station in the barrio to receive their allotments which is supposed to be enough. If they want to buy anything beyond these amounts, there are state markets which sell items at fixed prices, and there are also privately owned stores.

My "mother" seemed to actually be proud of the fact that because the Managuans were rationing, the campesinos had access to goods that are in short supply. In other families, however, I heard complaints that the rationed amounts weren't enough, they didn't like the lines, the markets didn't have the items they wanted. All of Nicaragua is suffering from inflation right now—the price of meat doubled while I was there, and there were a lot of complaints about that. It seemed that in the families where there was less knowledge and commitment to make the revolution work, there was more disgruntlement with the shortages and rationing process.

Q: How does the Contra war seem to be affecting life in Managua?

A: I did make some trips into the countryside. We visited a food cooperative near Esteli, one of the major food producing regions in Nicaragua, and one of the regions that the Contras are attacking. Basically the war has made defense the first priority, and right along with defense, the second priority is food production. There is a great consciousness to defend the food producing regions so that the country will be ensured a constant food supply.

In Managua, the war is just an ever present issue in people's minds. For instance, almost every family in the barrio I stayed in has lost someone to the war—this is how it comes home to many Nicaraguans. While I was there, two people associated with the barrio died fighting. Many Nicaraguans said to me that this is a real war here—there are people dying every day.

Another aspect of the war has been the recent implementation of the draft, which has been met with a lot of dissatisfaction among the more privileged youth who did not participate in the revolution and who don't feel the need to defend it. A lot of these kids are fleeing to Costa Rica. Among the more conservative political parties, the draft has been criticized as a form of state repression. One of their common complaints is that the young people are sent off to the war fronts without enough training. In general, I'd have to say that nobody liked the draft, yet thousands of kids around the ages of 16-18 have joined voluntarily to put in two years of service. I think that a lot of them feel that it is something necessary to do to defend their country.

There has also been an incredible militarization of the society. Almost 40% of their GNP is now going towards the war. The civil works projects that the government had planned in the areas of health and education have been diverted to the military infrastructure, and it was sad to see this happening. But one of the things that was repeated to me most often from the Managuans was: "We don't want the war, but we will defend ourselves at any cost." Many of the youth especially display this combative spirit, even children have this incredible combative spirit—that the aggression that they are suffering from the U.S. will not go away tomorrow or the next year or the next year. They're looking ten, twenty years down the line, and are willing to defend themselves—even if it means the militarization of their society.

Q: How does the U.S. embargo seem to be affecting daily life in Managua?

A: I think the first thing I noticed was how many consumer goods were in short supply—many commodities which especially affect the middle class. Also, In the market place there were rows and rows of empty shelves. The only canned goods available would be green peas from Czechoslovakia and Bulgaria. I noticed a general level of frustration about not being able to purchase items, and of not being able to get the needed quality of certain items. The grandmother in my family, for instance, begged me to send her some American thread. She worked in a sewing cooperative and they were getting their thread from Russia which she said was very coarse and just ill suited for the work they were doing.

Complaining more loudly was a T.V. store owner who told me, "There is just nothing to buy and nothing to sell." The taxi cab drivers, as a very independent class of workers, were having difficulties because of the gas rationing. They could only work half days, and so don't make as much as before.

Q: One of the inspiring and intriguing things about the Nicaraguan revolution has been the establishment of the Sandinista Defense Committees in the barrios. How do they function? Who participates in them?

A: The CDS seems to function as an important mass organization, doing things from taking care of the drunks coming home late at night, to making pots of soup to raise money for different causes in Nicaragua. The barrio that I was living in was particularly well organized. It had been very active during the insurrection in 1979, and therefore had always been a well organized barrio. And so the people there have, perhaps, remained more active than in other barrios. At the time I was there the CDS was making a comeback. Many of the families in my neighborhood told me how the CDS went through a period of bad leadership, and a lot of people lost trust and confidence in their ability to do anything. Since that time they've had a change of leadership, and the new people came to be respected.

Basically, the barrio was organized by streets, and each street had its own CDS and CDS leader. One of the things they did was organize the night vigilence, which occurs from 10 p.m. to 6 a.m. It's a way to keep the streets safe, and would also be used if a war situation developed in which people would have to mobilize during the night. Most families participated in this by doing two hours of night watch weekly. The CDS had about weekly meetings, one of which I attended. A funny thing that came up was a round of complaints that the meeting time was at the same time as some of the favorite T.V. soap operas, and that maybe if they changed the meeting time, more people would attend. I thought that this in and of itself was important, because one of the misconceptions of the CDS is that it is used by the government as a police organization that "spies" on people. This is just absolutely not true.

As for the CDS leadership, they are for the most part drawn from party membership, but it isn't always the case. You don't have to be a party member to be a CDS leader. You have to be well respected and committed to the revolutionary process. Also, the CDS is just one of the many groups that were organized before, during and after the revolution. There are church groups, women's groups, youth groups, who all seem to have input into the Nicaraguan National Congress.

Q: What's Nicaraguan T.V. like?

A: Very interesting. There are two stations, which are both Sandinista run. They have everything from "Simon & Simon" to coverage of Contra war activities. There's a great news channel, and coverage of cultural events. They do have a lot of U.S. programming—"We Are the World," and videos like MTV. They also carry a lot of Mexican and Brazilian soaps which are very popular.

Q: What about the mobilization process? What's happening to the kids?

A: There are a great number of youth in the Popular Militia, which is a voluntary branch of the army. They wil participate in civil defense if needed. They are also being mobilized to help with the large coffee, cotton, and general agri-export harvests; so, instead of spending summers working in the literacy campaign, the kids help bring in the crops.

In my "family" the seventeen year old mother had worked in the literacy campaign right after the revolution—she was about thirteen at the time. She had gone to the country to teach a small campesino family for five months. One of the great problems this caused in the family was the worry her mother experienced over the fact that she was leaving home at such a young age for the first time, and might get pregnant; which, in fact, happened. But she wasn't the only one, and as a result of the new and emerging independent roles for young women, the Sandinista government has had to confront the issue of sex education. They are just now beginning to talk about it.

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