

NORFOLK AND NORWICH – EL VIEJO FRIENDSHIP LINK

ANNUAL REPORT 2009



Government poster encouraging education

Translation - Together we go to the same school. Nobody is left without studying

Because education is my right you have already registered me.

The News

Have you heard? Have you heard?
That people who are good to this
Community are coming to visit us.

What can we offer them
if we have poverty in abundance?
But aren't we rich in beauty
And great in our knowledge?

I'll give you this handicraft from
my Nicaragua to remind you every day
that you visited beautiful lands and lakes

Thank you English and Nicaraguans
For helping us with our education
Holding out your hands to us
With all your heart.

You won't forget this precious poem.
Seek those who might love its words
and message.

*Poem written by Domingo Alfredo Ruiz Gomez
4th grade scholarship pupil at Francisco Morazan
School on the occasion of the Link Secretary's visit
to the school in May 2009.*



Alfredo Ruiz Gomez – Author of 'The News'.

THE NORFOLK AND NORWICH – EL VIEJO FRIENDSHIP LINK

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1. MEETINGS AND MEMBERSHIP

Ten meetings of the Committee were held during the year. The Committee did not meet during February, due to the AGM, and August.

Attendances were as follows;

| | | |
|------------------|---|----------------|
| Tony Bailey | - | 7 |
| Ralph Gayton | - | 10 |
| Rhys Jenkins | - | 8 |
| Fran Knight | - | 4 |
| Simon Nobbs | - | 8 |
| Jonathan Sheales | - | 10 |
| Sue Thomas | - | 7 |
| Vivienne Thomas | - | 6 (9 possible) |
| David Trevanion | - | 9 |

Membership of the Link at the end of 2009 was 34 a decrease of 6 over 2008. There were also a number of lapsed members. We still have eight affiliated organisations.

Your Committee has agreed to investigate possible ways in which membership can be encouraged.

2. FINANCE

We started the year with £60,097.66. Inevitably this meant far less pressure to raise further funds. We ended the year with £51,957.97. The Annual Report lays out in detail how this money was spent with only the bike ride as a fund raising event. There were some notable donations during the year, I mention in particular the Norwich City Council Twinning Committee, the National Union of journalists and once again our member, Mavis Wesley for holding her usual raffle and raising more than last year. We are most grateful to all donors – every amount counts. Thank you.

At the beginning of the year it soon became apparent that interest rates were having a drastic effect on the considerable sum of money of which we were now custodians. The committee decided after due consideration to transfer about a third of the total to a fixed rate interest account. On Sep 2nd the Norwich and Peterborough Building Society Account was closed (now paying no interest) and moves made to open a 12 month Fixed Rate Interest (community) account with the Cooperative Bank. Interest rates available for this type of account are very small wherever you go, however the ethical nature of this account also appealed. The rate of interest this pays for the 12 month period to 21 September 2010 is 0.59%.

In the meantime we continue with other funds in the Halifax accounts which are easily accessible and easy to manage.

3. LINK REPRESENTATIVE



Link representative Carmela Hernandez at her home in Leon

Sra Magdalena del Carmen Hernandez, or Carmela as she prefers to be known, has continued to be employed as the Link Representative in Nicaragua. Carmela makes regular visits to El Viejo and the eight schools in the Scholarship Project. She also has regular meetings with the Alcalde (Mayor) and she organises and chairs the bi-monthly meetings of the Teachers' Scholarship Committee.

Carmela sends us regular monthly reports of her activities which are reported to the Committee. She is also responsible for running the Link bank account in Nicaragua and sends us detailed quarterly financial reports. The Committee also receives copies of the e-mail correspondence between Carmela and the Link Secretary.

In reviewing Carmela's employment at the beginning of the year your committee decided to increase Carmela's salary from US\$120.00 to US\$125.00 per month.

One of the biggest challenges for Carmela is the annual purchase of the schoolbags and education material (exercise books, pens, pencils etc) for the 200 scholarship pupils. An even bigger, challenge is planning the making up and purchase of the 200 school uniforms. Each pupil has to be measured and the making of the uniforms has to be organised among local resources. Carmela also organises the distribution of the uniforms by making up an individual parcel for each child.

During the year Carmela had a number of problems with her personal computer and the Committee decided to authorise her to purchase a new laptop computer, printer and scanner to ensure good regular communication with the Secretary.

4. SCHOLARSHIP PROJECT

The Scholarship Project provides 200 scholarships for children from the poorest families in eight areas of El Viejo. The eight schools in the project and the number of scholarships in each during 2009 were:

| Nº | Name of School | No of scholarships |
|----|--|--------------------|
| 1 | Hermana Rosario Martínez and Hna Rosario Mayorga | 42 |
| 2 | Amigos de Holanda | 29 |

| | | |
|-----------------------------------|-------------------------------------|------------|
| 3 | Francisco Morazán | 40 |
| 4 | NORWICH | 23 |
| 5 | Hermana Maritza | 26 |
| 6 | Evemilda Somarriba | 17 |
| 7 | Nuestra Señora del Perpetuo Socorro | 15 |
| 8 | El recreo | 8 |
| Total Scholarships in 2009 | | 200 |

There was an intake of 56 new pupils to the project in 2009 arising from 34 pupils who graduated from grade 6 at the end of 2008, 8 pupils who failed to reach the required standard of achievement, and 12 pupils who moved away from El Viejo.

The local scholarship committee consists of two teachers from each school, a representative from the local council, and the local delegate from the Ministry of Education. The Committee meets bi-monthly and is chaired by Carmela. The Committee deals with all matters concerning the distribution of scholarships, and any issues arising from the schools and is responsible for the administration of the project. The Link Committee receives minutes of the meetings as part of Carmela's monthly reports.

The Committee also makes suggestions and recommendations for more general matters affecting the schools. Typical examples relate to meeting the costs of



Typical sheet of measurements taken by Carmela to make up uniforms for the scholarship children



The well at Francisco Morazan improved by the Link to ensure constant supply of water

minor repairs to the fabric of the schools and, in the case of the school at Francisco Morazan, paying for the deepening of the school well to ensure an adequate water supply during the dry season.

A major event is the annual distribution of school uniforms. In 2009 this took place during the Secretary's visit in May. All 200 scholarship pupils attend together

with their parents and teachers. The local council members also took part and there was entertainment with local dancers. Each child was called and came forward to receive a parcel containing their uniform. Carmela had made up the individual parcels each with a label with the child's name and the Link logo.

At the end of the school year 47 scholarship students graduated from grade 6 at a ceremony in December organised by Carmela. This was 11 more than the previous year. Each graduate received a framed certificate of their graduation.

5. REVIEW OF SCHOLARSHIP PROJECT

The Scholarship Project was launched in 2002, initially for a period of 6 years – a complete primary school cycle, with a commitment to review the project at the end of that time. In 2008 it was agreed to extend the project **by** one year and to carry out a thorough review during 2009. The original thinking was that it Nicaragua economy between 2002 and 2008 would make such assistance to education unnecessary. Sadly this has proved not to be the case. In January the Committee considered a report by Ministry of Education which noted some improvements such as the abolition of parental contributions and a slow improvement



*The children at the uniform distribution ceremony in May 2010.
The parents are seated on the left*

in teachers' pay. The report made it clear that much remained to be done such as the provision of more education places, with some 400,000 children still with no access to education, and improvement in teachers' conditions.

The Committee also received an assessment of the project from Gill Holmes, a British Expatriate who has lived in Nicaragua for many years. Gill works with visiting NGOs and has wide experience of the economic and political situation in Nicaragua. She had also accompanied the

Secretary on visits to Nicaragua over the previous four years. Gill's conclusion was that the project had made a big contribution to education in El Viejo which would be greatly missed if it was discontinued or diluted. She firmly recommended that the project should continue.

The Committee sought the views of the teachers, the local council, and the Ministry delegate by means of detailed questionnaires. The Secretary also discussed the review with the Teachers' Committee and with parents at all the schools during his visit in May.

All the investigations and the questionnaires demonstrated great support for the project and its value to the communities it served. The project had encouraged growth of communal interest and greater involvement in education and had also resulted in improved participation and achievement by the children. All parties also stated that the project should be continued unchanged.

In view of the results of the enquiries made and the enthusiasm shown by everyone involved, the Committee decided to extend the project, initially for a further period of three years, and to increase the number of scholarships to 240 from January, 2010.

6. COMPUTERS FOR SCHOOLS

During the year the Committee investigated the possibility of providing a computer to each of the eight schools in the Scholarship Project. Access to information technology in Nicaragua generally lags far behind the situation in UK. Although the situation is improving in the private sector the public sector is not well served (the local health centre, for instance has only one PC). There is a hunger for better provision, particularly among the young. There are three Internet Cafes in El Viejo which are well used by young people, mostly for computer games.

The proposal to provide a PC for each school has proved to be contentious with some members of the Committee expressing doubts about their sustainability, the lack of electricity in some schools, how they would be used and the impact they would make in the classroom. The teachers, themselves, were very enthusiastic and feel that they would make a useful contribution to their task. They are eager to get started.

The Secretary reported on the responses from the schools concerning what the teachers had said about how the computers would be used, what would they be used for, how the would computers assist the students and how many teachers had experience of computers.

The responses had much in common and were quite positive. In summary the replies indicated that the computers would be used as support for the teachers and with a positive attitude of learning. The children would benefit from teachers' access to teaching resources and the use of educational programmes. A few teachers already had some experience of using computers.

The Committee's attention was drawn to comments of support by the Link representative contained in a report and to the undertakings given by the Alcalde to provide training facilities for the teachers in the use and care of computers.

Eventually it was agreed to authorise the purchase of 8 computers, i.e. one for each of the scholarship schools but that Carmela be informed that before the purchase the committee would want to see

(a) that the training for the teachers at the town hall, as suggested by the Alcalde, is put in place,

(b) that details of the program of training is sent to the committee, for its information.

(c) that the provision of electricity to the three schools without a supply is investigated, as suggested by the Alcalde at the Teachers committee on 5 May.

(d) that acceptable arrangements are made for the security of the computers to protect them from dust and theft.

7. THE SCHOOL GARDEN PROJECT

The 2008 Annual Report included information about a pilot scheme for a school garden project. The intention of the project is to teach children about the value of growing food that can be used to supplement the basic meal that is provided to children and to teach them about the value of proper nutrition. It is also intended to couple this practical activity with lessons about the environment, including their local environment and the importance of looking after their surroundings. It is intended to investigate the commissioning of



The plant nursery at the Evemilda Somarriba School

appropriate education material that can be used in the senior grades of the scholarship schools.

The pilot project was initiated during the year at the Evemilda Somarriba School and although there were problems in the latter part of the winter growing season due to drought caused by el Niño, a good start was made and a lot of preparatory work had been completed including the creation of a plant nursery and clearing an area for planting. Some other schools have already set aside an area for planting on the assumption that the project will be extended to all the scholarship schools, demonstrating an eagerness to become involved.

8. LINK WEBSITE

In March the Committee approved the setting up of an internet site for the Link and also approved a design put forward by the Secretary. The site was set up and launched on 6th April with the valuable assistance and guidance from Link member Sid Frisby.

Work is proceeding on adding a new activities page which can be regularly updated.

9. VISIT TO NICARAGUA BY LINK SECRETARY

The Link Secretary visited Nicaragua from 4th to 10th May 2009. Meetings were held with the Ministry of Education in Managua about developments in the national education programme and with an prominent economist about the effects of the recession on the Nicaraguan economy.

The main objectives of the visit were to have talks with the Alcalde about ways in which links with Norwich could be strengthened at official level and how the El Viejo Council could improve its assistance to Carmela. The Secretary also discussed Carmela's work with her and looked at ways in which our working arrangements could be improved.



Children at the Nuestra Señora del Perpetuo Socorro School welcoming the Link Secretary.

The principal activity during the visit was the distribution of the packages of school uniforms to the scholarship children. This was a momentous event attended by all 200 children with scholarships, their parents and teachers as well as the members of the local council.

The Secretary attended a meeting of the scholarship teachers' committee and discussed the review of the project with them. He also visited all the eight schools in the scholarship project and had further discussions with all the teachers and many parents who attended.

It was very clear that everyone attached great importance to the Scholarship Project and that it had made a great impression on the various communities.

At one school, Francisco Morazan we had an example of the value of the scholarships when one 5th grade boy composed a poem more or less on the spot, about the work of the link . This showed a precocious talent on the [art of the young pupil, a talent which was brought out because he was awarded a scholarship and which would have been missed without it. The head teacher at this school was also a very quiet but inspirational individual.

The Secretary also inspected progress with the development of the pilot project for the school garden project at the Evemilda Somarriba school (*see 7 above*).

10. INTERNATIONAL EXCHANGE

Committee approved proposal for international young peoples' exchange through Norfolk International Projects and EU Youth Programme for an exchange between UK, Holland, Columbia and Nicaragua, in El Viejo. Funding would be 80% provided by the EU. Unfortunately our application was not approved by EU.

11. SUMMER BIKE RIDE.

Annual Summer Bike Ride took place on 19th July – the 30th anniversary of the Sandinista revolution. Those who took part were; Rhys Jenkins, Simon Nobbs, Clive Osborne and Sue Thomas. The route once again took them to Burston near Diss, the site of the famous school strike which lasted from 1914 to 1933.. The event raised £646.00

12. NORWICH CITY COUNCIL TWINNING COMMITTEE

The Link was represented on the City Council's Twinning Committee by the Secretary. The Committee consists of six members of the City Council, representatives of the four twinning organisations and the Chairperson of the County Council. The Committee meets three times during the year and received regular reports from all four organisations. The Committee has a small budget which is used to make grants in support of activities and visits with the four twin cities of Rouen, Koblenz, Novi Sad, and El Viejo. Grants are also made to the twinning organisations to help with their administrative costs.

The Link took part in the competition to name the new pedestrian bridge across the River Wensum, proposing that it be named 'the El Viejo Friendship Bridge'. Our proposal was unsuccessful so El Viejo remains the Norwich's only twin city without recognition through a street or other public place name.

13. 25TH ANNIVERSARY OF THE LINK

The Link will celebrate its 25th anniversary in 2011 and some thought has begun to be given about how to mark the occasion. In September the Committee agreed a broad set of suggestions for consideration including that, if possible, the occasion should be celebrated by events in both Norwich and El Viejo. It was also agreed that consideration should be given to inviting a visit to Norwich from El Viejo, possibly involving a teacher and/or a pupil from one of the scholarship schools. Consideration might also be given to launching a special project in El Viejo to mark the occasion.

Other suggestions included seeking a Civic reception to mark the occasion and approaching schools in Norwich and Norfolk for support of a special project such as a school improvement programme.

A proposal for a visit by the Secretary to discuss the anniversary with Carmela and the Alcalde and to carry out some detailed research into living conditions, employment, and the condition of schools in preparation for the suggested school improvement project was narrowly rejected by the Committee.

The Committee will welcome ideas from members about the anniversary celebration.

14. BRISTOL CONFERENCE

The Bristol – Puerto Morazan Link invited other cities and towns in UK with twinning links in Nicaragua to attend a conference in November, as part of their 25th anniversary celebrations. The aim of the conference was to inspire Local Authority Councillors and Council Officers to get more involved in projects with their twin cities or towns in Nicaragua. The conference included presentations and case studies from cities twinned with Nicaragua as well as information and workshops on how Local Authorities can access and use funding for these types of projects.

The conference took place on 12th November, 2009, at Bristol City Council House and Norwich was represented by Valerie Hay, who services the City Council Twinning Committee. It was opened by the Lord Mayor of Bristol.

The Executive Mayor of Puerto Morazan, Sr. Emigdio Jesús Téllez Mairena gave a Nicaraguan view on the importance of twinning, and Sheila Long, Chief Executive of Leicester City Council spoke about projects carried out in Nicaragua and Leicester, the role of Leicester City Council, and the benefits for Local Community and City Council.

Katrin Sturhan, representing the Stichtung (Foundation) Utrecht-Leon spoke about the projects they had carried out in Leon and the role of Local Authorities

Workshops took place on the types of funding available to Local Authorities including experience in Bristol City Council with education projects, and another concerned with the Local Government Alliance for International Development.

15. MAYRA SIRIAS

Mayra Sirias was employed as the Link Representative in Nicaragua from 1994 until 2007. Mayra was a very active participant in the 1979 revolution that overthrew the Somoza dictatorship and was also very prominent in the Nicaraguan women's movement from the date of the revolution.

Recently, and following the criminalisation of therapeutic abortion, Mayra has been the subject of vicious persecution by the Citizen's Power Committee in Leon where she lives because of her activity and, in particular, because of her support for the 'Rosita' case of a young girl of about nine years of age who was subject to a violent rape.

Citizen's Power Committees have been set up across the country by the ruling Sandinista Party to defend Government policy and to tackle opposition. This has resulted in violent confrontations in various parts of the country.

After various hostile incidents, the latest was too much for Mayra Sirias, member of the coordinating committee of the Women's Network against Violence, who alleged that the so-

called Citizen's Power Committees in León are more powerful than both the municipal authorities and the police themselves. The following is an account of events reported in a Nicaraguan daily newspaper;

According to Sirias, the harassment started when Daniel Ortega's government took power. Initially because, along with other women's rights activists, she has been persecuted through the courts for the "Rosita" case.

Even though the case remained in legal limbo, various incidents started happening which were too much of a coincidence to have been one-offs. Among these, she counts the almost total theft of her belongings where, in addition to money, all her household electrical goods were taken, including her computer. This happened while she was accompanying Dora María Tellez out of solidarity during her hunger strike against the loss of the Sandinista Renewal Movement's legal status.

After that it carried on with the windscreen of her car being smashed; they also cut the battery cables and caused a short circuit. In addition two men kept watch on her house and all her movements.

They even took over her property

"I complained to the authorities but until now I haven't wanted to make it public, however the latest thing to happen is that after buying a plot of land off Bavinic, with all the documents from the León Council, the Council's approval with all the respective building permits, right now I am fighting the Citizen's Power Committee because they won't let me build on the land," said the affected party. With her property documents in hand, Sirias stated that the CPC claim the area is in the municipality's green belt and between insults they say they're the People as President and are the ones who rule here.

"I built a fence and they turned up armed with sticks and stones to pull it down, being excessively violent, right in front of a police patrol that did nothing to stop my property being destroyed. Whilst it's true that both the municipal authorities as well as the police have treated me well and have helped me, when the CPC kick up a fuss, they prefer to look the other way", assures Sirias.

She adds that both the police and the municipal authorities have asked her to talk to these people, however she refuses to, because these people, the CPC, have no authority whilst the relevant authorities cross their arms and don't protect her rights.

The Committee were most concerned about these reports and decided to send a message of sympathy and support to Mayra together with a small gift of \$100. We have received a message of thanks from Mayra.

15. ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

As always in a voluntary organisation such as the Link, many people are involved in all sorts of ways and it is right and proper that their contribution should be recognised and acknowledged. Most important is the continued support of our own members. Without their support nothing would be achieved. We are always ready, and anxious to welcome new members to help with that we do.

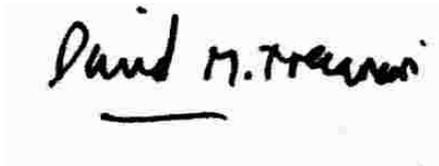
The ability to communicate effectively with our friends in Nicaragua means that translation plays a very important part in Link activity. We have been fortunate in always having people we can call on to translate English to Spanish and vice-versa. Recently our band of translators has been expanded with volunteers from Voluntary Norfolk. We are most grateful to Niki Taigel and Katherine Osborne for their help during the year. We also

welcome two recent volunteers, James O'Brien and Roberto Ramirez who have agreed to help out with translation.

We are also grateful to Gill Holmes who lives in Managua and who, once again, accompanied the secretary during his visit to Nicaragua in May. She puts her personal vehicle at our disposal on these occasions as well as providing interpretation. Her knowledge and experience of the country and its people are most valuable. Gill also sends us useful information from time to time.

We particularly thank the members of the Executive Committee for their time and enthusiasm in turning up each month for our meetings.

Finally, we thank the City Council for the facilities they provide for our meetings at City Hall and for the printing services that we receive. We couple with that our gratitude for the support we receive from the Council's Twinning Officer, Andy Emms and the Twinning Committee Officer, Valerie Hay.



Chairperson



Secretary

February, 2010