

NORWICH CITY COUNCIL

TWINNING COMMITTEE – 3rd October, 2019.

REPORT OF NORFOLK AND NORWICH – EL VIEJO FRIENDSHIP LINK

1. REPORT OF VISIT TO NICARGUA BY DAVID RABY - LINK CHAIRPERSON 8 – 18 June, 2019

I visited Nicaragua for ten days in June 2019, travelling by air from Mexico City to Managua on June 8th and returning on June 18th. A very full programme was arranged with the help primarily of **the Ambassador in London, Guisell Morales Echaverry**, and of our Link representative, **Carmela**. This included four days in El Viejo with visits to 9 schools, and a VIP programme in Managua including meetings with trade union leaders, the President of the National Assembly, the Director of the National Theatre, the Minister of Municipal Affairs, the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs and the Sandinista Youth.

El Viejo. Since this was the main purpose of the visit I will report first on activities in our twin city. Carmela (who seems to be known to most people there as Magdalena) had made most of the arrangements, with the help of **the Alcaldesa (Mayor) Maria Guevara** and her staff. We arrived in El Viejo on the afternoon of Monday 10th June, having first had a meeting with the Alcaldesa of **Chinandega**. This had been arranged by the Ambassador on the grounds that Chinandega is the capital of the Department (province) and is right next door to El Viejo. We had a very good discussion with the Alcaldesa of Chinandega, Aura Lyla Padilla, and her secretary Jessica Cruz, who would like the twinning to include their city (but I made it clear that it is only with El Viejo, although any support from the departmental capital is welcome). They stressed the importance of the Peace & Reconciliation Process and of supporting small & medium enterprises.

After a very good restaurant lunch provided by the Chinandega authorities we were taken to **El Viejo** where we met the Alcaldesa Maria Guevara and Carmela/Magdalena. They had very positive words for the Link and gave us a very warm welcome, taking us right away to visit a luxury tourist hotel on the coast and an inland tourist hostel where we had another meal. They emphasised the importance of tourism for the economy.

On Tuesday 11th June we began with a visit to the **Francisco Morazán School** where we were greeted by the teachers and 70 or 80 young students, with speeches and dance performances and then a hearty lunch (at 10 am!) The overall conditions of the school seemed good and they participate in a national environmental programme. Then we went on to the **Norwich Inglaterra School** where of course the welcome was particularly warm, and one teacher remembers Ralph and his family very well. Here we had three separate meetings, one in each classroom; the school and the community clearly had less resources than Francisco Morazán. Again there were speeches and dance performances, and a snack. Then we continued to number three on our list, **El Recreo School**, a small school but again an enthusiastic welcome with speeches and dancing and another snack. School number four was **Amigos de Holanda**, a larger institution with 550 students; maybe 100 attended the open-air event with speeches, dancing and poetry (to which I contributed my own doggerel). School number 5 (and the last one in a very long day) was **Hermana Maria Martinez Manso Ruiz**, also a large school: it was too late for a formal event (3:30 pm) but we saw the students hard at work clearing the school garden for new planting. After this we were given a fine performance in the municipal videoconference room by a young group who perform local traditional dances. Later we visited the Basilica and then had a delicious restaurant meal.

Wednesday 12th June: three schools, **Perpetuo Socorro, Hermana Maritza Legarreta and Evemilda Samarriba**. Again, meetings with speeches, dancing and snacks. At Perpetuo

Socorro which is quite large and well equipped they did make a request for help with repairing the roof (see my general comments below), they also gave us a great reception outside in the playground. We then had a restaurant meal followed by a meeting with several teachers from rural schools (including some we had already met) in the videoconference room which has a/c and is often used for meetings. Then in the same room we were treated to a performance by the Municipal Choir which is a recent creation but has already achieved a high level of performance.

Thursday 13th June: visited one school, **Rosario Mayorga**. Then a meeting in the videoconference room with the entire City Council including councillors, officials and union reps. One councillor who is also a historian pointed out that El Viejo has 1,000 years of history and stressed the importance of the Sandinista Revolution and also of the 30 years' cooperation with Norwich. Others such as the Deputy Mayor, Boanerges Espinoza, spoke of the poverty of the area and the importance of the Norwich twinning. Several speakers mentioned the impact of US hostility and the damage inflicted by last year's attempted coup, when the rioters almost set fire to the City Hall. After this we attended an event at the city market place commemorating the 40th anniversary of the assassination of Elisabeth Mendez, a young woman who with others was killed shortly before the revolutionary victory. We then set off by car for Managua with the Alcaldesa and a chauffeur, and Carmela/Magdalena whom we left in Leon (where we also had lunch).

General observations about the schools: the enthusiasm and dedication of the teachers and students left an unforgettable impression. They are all extremely grateful for the support provided by the Link. In all cases I assured them that our work will continue and also spoke about the cultural exchange project. I emphasised that the twinning is a two-way process of solidarity, and although we provide material assistance we also receive inspiration from their work and the example of free public education. I also asked what they know about Norwich and England/UK, it was clear that they don't know much, but we had some good conversations with students on the subject. From talks with the Alcaldesa, Carmela, the teachers and the local rep of the Ministry of Education (MinEd) I was able to clarify that the schools are built and in principle maintained by the MinEd, but resources are lacking and so the municipality and the communities (parents) also contribute. This also applies to the toilets, some of which I inspected; some are better than others but they are mostly latrines. There is no piped water in some rural areas, hence the poor conditions. All of those I spoke to (including later in Managua the Director of INOFOM, in effect the Minister for Local Government), recognised that this is a serious problem. As for specific requests like that from Perpetuo Socorro for help with repairing the roof, the authorities said this is not really our problem, our support for the students is greatly appreciated but they don't expect us to solve the overall problem of school maintenance.

There is a Committee of Teachers participating in the Twinning which meets every two months with Carmela/Magdalena and the Alcaldesa. They stressed the positive contribution of Carmela.

Cultural exchange project: everyone was enthusiastic about this. They say they have all the necessary equipment, and certainly the videoconference room is quite impressive. The head of the IT Team is Juan Carlos Herrera B. and his contact info is herrerabc@gmail.com, tel (with WhatsApp) is +505 8265 4473. Also he speaks English which will be a great help.

Managua. On the day of our arrival, Saturday June 8th, we had a meeting with **trade union leaders:** Domingo Pérez, National Secretary of UNE public sector workers, José Bermudez, General Secretary of the FNT (equivalent to UNISON) and one other from the Water Workers. JB pointed out that the conflict in Nicaragua is not new, imperialist aggression began with the Contreras in the 1980s, and this external hostility remains their biggest

problem. Today they are united in struggle with the ALBA countries, notably Cuba and Venezuela. In education he mentioned that in 1979 there were 6,000 teachers, today there are 52,000. It's not that we support the Government, it is our Government. The work of the Link is greatly appreciated and he particularly mentioned that Ralph has been supporting Nicaragua for 40 years. DP said that he could if we like write a report on the work of the Link as they see it; he recognised the work of NSC, particularly Louise Richards and Ralph. He pointed out that the GINI index for the country was 0.63 in 2006 and only 0.29 in the latest UN report, indicating a big reduction in inequality.

After the trip to El Viejo we arrived in Managua again on the evening of Thursday 13th June. At 9 am on Friday 14th we had a meeting with the Director of INIFOM (the **Nicaraguan Institute for Municipal Promotion**, more or less the Department for Local Government), Guiomar Irias and her team. She outlined their work supporting and coordinating municipalities in education, health, environment and infrastructure. An interesting project they have developed is the CDIs, Centres for Infant Development, somewhat like Sure Start. Until recently they had monthly meetings in Managua with all mayors, but this took up a lot of time for the mayors with travelling, and now (in the last two months) they have started having these meetings online.

Later that morning we had a meeting at **the HQ of the teachers' union ANDEN/GCTEN**, with Pedro Cortedano (Labour Affairs officer) and Bernarda López (Organisational secretary). They talked about their contact with the NUT/NEU in Britain, especially Julia Lamin. They emphasised positive achievements in education: school lunches & milk for students, the spread of IT facilities, and the MinEd's decision to start teaching English from the first year of primary school from this year onwards. The union helps teachers with mortgages and also with transport. They have continued to recruit new members (average 500 a month) even during last year's violence.

On the Friday afternoon we were received by the **President of the National Assembly, Dr Gustavo Porras**, and its First Secretary, Raquel Dixon (a bilingual English & Spanish speaking MP for the North Atlantic Coast constituency). They stressed the importance of the fight for Peace with three new laws: (1) Creating Reconciliation, Justice & Peace Committees in more than 2,000 localities; (2) a law for Assistance to Victims; and (3) the Amnesty Law. In all this they follow the Belfast Guidelines including no repetition of amnestied offences. They are optimistic despite the difficulties. Dr Porras sends greetings to Ralph and to Louise Richards.

Finally at 4 pm on Friday 14th we had a meeting with the **Sandinista Youth** in the Japanese Park. There were about 80 of them present, along with the media. I talked about the Link, about NSC and solidarity in general and how it is a two-way street: that their efforts to build a just society in Nicaragua are an inspiration for us in the UK. They were shocked and very interested to learn that in a rich country like Britain there are people living on the street and children who go to school without breakfast: this made them all the more committed to working with us and combatting media falsehoods.

On Saturday 15th and Sunday 16th we visited friends (a Swiss-Colombian couple working on a rural environmental project) in **Matagalpa**, returning to Managua on the Sunday evening.

On Monday 17th we had a brief but very positive meeting with the **Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs, Arlette Marengo**. She pointed out the need to overcome misleading media reports and that the country is at peace. She praised the work of the Ambassador in London.

Later that morning we visited the **National Theatre** and its Director **Ramón Rodríguez** and several of his colleagues. They showed us all round the theatre and described its very varied

work, including work in Colleges of Education. They were very interested in our cultural exchange project and in Slow Theatre, although I had to stress that our primary interest is in exchange with El Viejo rather than national projects.

In all of these activities we were accompanied by officials of the Foreign Ministry who were very helpful and who drove us around in an official car. On the Monday afternoon they took us on a tourist trip to Masaya and Granada and up to the crater of the Masaya Volcano. Finally on Tuesday June 18th we flew back from Managua to Mexico City.

David Raby
Link Chairperson.

2. FUTURE VISIT TO EL VIEJO – NORWICH YOUTH PROJECTS

The Committee has agreed to support a proposal for a visit to El Viejo, probably in 2001 by a group of young people organised by Norwich Youth Projects. The group will consist of approximately 25 young people from Norwich aged 15 to 25 accompanied by up to five adults. The project is in a very early stage of development at present but it is likely to involve the group in undertaking small development type projects suggested by the El Viejo Alcaldia, as yet undetermined, but possibly involving the schools in the Link's scholarship scheme.

The next stage will involve discussions with the El Viejo local council to consider and agree the activities to be undertaken by the group.

We will keep the Committee informed of progress.

3. THE SLOW THEATRE GROUP

Based in Norwich and founded on an ethos of cooperation and team building, Slow Theatre combines laughter and fun with concentration and group work to help people develop in confidence and communication skills either in community projects, bespoke workshops or in our weekly classes. Slow Theatre teaches the techniques of stage craft and communication. We strive to be inclusive, tolerant and always treat people with respect.

The Group works with social purpose, initiating, and working with community projects for people both young and old. They state that It is important for us that we feed our profits back into the local community, The Slow Theatre Group is a not-for-profit theatre company.

The Group proposes to create a project entitled 'Bridging the Atlantic' using multimedia technology to create sustainable ways for twinning projects such the Norwich - El Viejo to engage diverse younger generations by creating both digital and live spaces which offer local people in both cities the potential to explore and connect current issues and histories through performance and production art.

The Link Committee has agreed to support this project which is innovative in its user of modern electronic facilities in linking our two communities. The total cost of the project is estimated to be £3,500 and the Group is applying for financial support from the Norwich Freeman's Charity.