

NORFOLK AND NORWICH – EL VIEJO FRIENDSHIP LINK

ANNUAL GENERAL MEETING

17TH FEBRUARY, 2016

ANNUAL REPORT OF THE EXECUTIVE COMMITTEE

1. Meetings and membership

Your Committee met on eight occasions since the 2015 AGM and a special all member meeting also took place on 16th September, 2015 to consider the future funding of the Link.

Attendances at the meetings were;

Anthony Bailey	6
Ralph Gayton	8
Brenda Gayton	7
Dr. Rhys Jenkins	8
Hilary King*	2
Susan Thomas	6
Vivien Thomas	3
David Trevanion	8

*See 2 below

Membership amounted to 37 individual members and 7 organisations. Two new individual members joined during the year.

2. Hilary King

It is with great regret that we have to record the untimely death on 25th June of Hilary King who suffered a serious stroke. Hilary was an enthusiastic member of the committee with a particular interest in the welfare of young people, particularly young girls. Her loss was a serious blow. She was a fluent Spanish speaker and gave us great assistance in translating messages from our representative in Nicaragua. Hilary was also a very busy officer of the Norwich Rotary Club. Her enthusiasm and knowledge of international matters will be greatly missed. A memorial service for Hilary will take place at Norwich Cathedral on 20th February, 2016.

3. Carmela Hernandez.

Carmela has continued as our local representative in El Viejo and has managed our affairs very effectively. Carmela lives in Leon some thirty mile or so from El Viejo and she travels to and fro by bus. She lives with her mother and two daughters. She has another daughter who lives in Iceland.

Carmela operates as the Chairperson of the Teachers Committee which consists of two teachers from each of the scholarship schools, the local representative of the Ministry of Education and a representative of the El Viejo local council. The Committee meets every two

months and is responsible for the day to day organisation of the Scholarship Project under the terms of the approved Scholarship Document.

Carmela was out of action for a few weeks in September/October suffering from an attack of Chikungunya, a mosquito borne illness which causes muscular pain and weakness. Thankfully she recovered fairly quickly but it was a very unpleasant experience.

We record our thanks to Carmela for her dedication to the project and the effective way in which she looks after our interests in Nicaragua.

4. Translation.

Obviously, the Link depends on accurate translation of the correspondence and reports we receive from our representative in El Viejo and the loss of Hilary King (see above) did cause some problems.

However, we were able to secure the assistance of Gill Holmes who lived in Nicaragua for many years and worked as a professional interpreter and with the Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign. Gill returned to England a couple of years or so ago in the interests of her daughter's education. Gill was well known to the Link Secretary having accompanied him as interpreter on several of his visits to El Viejo. She is not only a fluent Spanish speaker but is very familiar with life in Nicaragua.

Gill now works as a professional interpreter and has agreed to translate Carmela's reports etc for us at a preferential rate which is a great help. We also have access to a couple of local Spanish speakers who have agreed to help out occasionally by translating our correspondence etc. into Spanish.

5. Future Funding Link Activities

(a) All Member Meeting

A special all member meeting took place on 16th September, 2015 to consider the future funding of Link activities and to make appropriate recommendations to the Executive Committee. Ten members attended the meeting to debate a report from the Secretary and a financial report and summary from the Treasurer.

The reports pointed out that in 2014 the cost of the 200 scholarships in the scholarship project, which had been operating since 2003, amounted to US\$12,495 or £8060 at the then rate of exchange against an annual subscription income of only £2262 plus Gift Aid of approximately £550. Other income from special events was expected to be approximately £1,500.

It was pointed out that the Link did not have a 'reserves policy' which was necessary to deal with any issues arising from possible dissolution of the Link such as a severance payment to the Link's representative in Nicaragua.

The meeting decided to recommend that a reserve of £1,500 be held as a reserve to meet emergency and any winding up costs

The meeting also decided that, in order to bring expenditure in line with affordable income, to recommend the Executive Committee that an immediate reduction in the number of scholarships to 100 was required in order to achieve the necessary reduction in expenditure.

(b) Response of Executive Committee.

The recommendations of the All Member meeting were considered by the Link Executive Committee at their meeting on 14th October, 2015.

The Committee agreed to set aside the sum of £1,500 as a reserve fund.

The Committee decided to defer consideration of the recommendation to reduce the number of scholarships to 100 to enable them to refer it to the El Viejo Teachers' Committee.

The Teachers' Committee responded by submitting a letter setting out their proposals to deal with the financial pressures facing the Link, as follows

- (i) To maintain the number of scholarships at 200 each year
- (ii) To restrict the scholarships to the provision of schoolbags and education material.
- (iii) That the contents of the schoolbags be related to the particular educational requirements of the grades of the pupils.
- (iv) To cease to provide uniforms as it is not now essential for pupils to wear a uniform.
- (v) To allocate an additional sum of US\$2.00 per student to the value of the contents of schoolbag to provide additional education material (e.g. dictionaries for junior pupils and geometry sets for more senior pupils).

The letter was signed by 14 teachers from eight of the schools represented on the committee.

The Executive Committee informed Carmela that they generally agreed with the proposals from the Teachers and that they accepted the principle of allocating US\$2.00 per pupil for additional materials and that uniforms would no longer be provided.

It was also agreed to review Carmela's salary in January 2016 in view of the reduction in her workload.

(c) Subsequent Developments

The Teachers' Committee subsequently submitted two lists of materials for the schoolbags, set out in Carmela's report to the meeting of the Committee on 20th January 2016, for (a) scholarship students in Grades 1 to 3 and (b) for those in grades 4 to 6 which amounted in total to US\$3693.00. The cost of the Schoolbags and contents in 2015 amounted to US\$1204. If the amount of US\$2.00 per student, previously agreed, is added the total cost would amount to US\$4093, an increase over 2015 of US\$2888. This would take us back to square one and not result in a reduction of costs.

The main difference in the contents of the schoolbags between 2015 and as now proposed concerns the type of contents. Up to and including 2015 the contents consisted principally of consumable items such as exercise books, pens and pencils. The only non-consumable item was a pencil sharpener. The contents now proposed includes a large proportion of non-consumable items – handwriting pen, geometry set, scissors, calculator, metal ruler and dictionary. The Committee considers that, with reasonable care, these items should be expected to last longer than a year.

(d) Committee's Decision – January 2016.

The Committee felt that there should be some flexibility with the schoolbags and they decided that a total budget for the schoolbags in 2016 should be set at US\$3,000 to cover three groups of items as set out below.

Group 1 the schoolbags and contents as in 2015, as follows:

200 schoolbags with printed logo
8 boxes 200 page stapled and ruled exercise books.
1 box 200 page stapled and double ruled exercise books,
1 box 200 page stapled and quad ruled exercise books,
200 coloured pencils,
17 boxes graphite pencils
200 black pencils.
The total cost of these items in 2015 amounted to US\$ 1191.00

Group 2

An amount of US\$2.00 per scholarship student (total US\$400.00) for the schools to use at their discretion

(Add US\$400.00 to cost of Group 1 - total US\$ 1591.00).

Group 3

The balance of the amount of US\$3000.00 – that is US\$1409.00 - to be available to the Teachers' Committee to purchase additional items for the schoolbags at their discretion.

This approach would allow the Executive Committee to make the savings which they consider necessary while providing basic education material and, at the same time, giving scope and freedom to the Teachers' Committee to add such additional items to the schoolbags that they feel necessary.

Carmela has been asked to put this decision to the Teachers' Committee for their consideration and, hopefully, agreement.

(e) Other matters.

Carmela accepted that her workload would be reduced and she also accepted that it would be reasonable for her salary to be reduced. The Committee subsequently offered a reduction from USD\$180.00 per month to US\$120.00 per month which she has accepted. (Note: it is usual in Nicaragua to pay 13 months per year.)

There will be other consequential savings in items such as travelling and subsistence payments.

6. The Scholarship Project.

The Scholarship Project continues to meet a need for children from poor families. El Viejo lies at the extreme north-western area of Nicaragua where agriculture of one sort or another is the main area of employment. Much of this employment is seasonal and temporary particularly in the sugar plantations which cover a vast area of the central area of the country. There is one large sugar refinery but little other organised industry exists. Fishing around the coast is largely family oriented but there are a couple of quite large shrimp farms in the north of the country. Cattle farming is undertaken but, again, is largely family centred and small scale.

Family incomes, therefore, are small and variable with much temporary and seasonal employment hence the importance placed on the scholarships which enable children from the poorest families to attend school and get an education. This is borne out by frequent comments from teachers. The recent response from the teachers' committee to the suggestion that the number of scholarships should be reduced by half shows the importance attached to the project.

The value of the project is illustrated by the high level of attendance and enthusiasm of parents at the annual distribution of schoolbags, and, up to last year, the distribution of uniforms. Many parents also assist the teachers by helping to prepare food supplied by the Government. They also provide supervision of pre-school groups.

The Teachers' Committee is an important part of the project. It is made up of two teachers from each of the schools, a representative of the Town Hall, the local representative of the Ministry of Education (who also happens to be a teacher) and the local Link Representative, Carmela Hernandez, who chairs the meetings which take place every two months.

Distribution of Scholarships in 2015

School	No. of Scholarships
El Recreo	5
Norwich	25
Rosario Martinez	25
Nuestra Sra. Del Perpetuo	24
Francisco Morazan	29
Rosario Mayorga	16
Hna. Maritza Martinez	25
Amigos de Holanda	26
Evemilda Somarriba	26
Total	200

7. Survey of School Latrines.

At the suggestion of Committee member Hilary King, who was concerned about the health and well-being of girl pupils at the schools, the Committee undertook a survey of the latrines at the scholarship schools.

The survey revealed a troubling situation. The latrines generally are nothing more than poorly maintained primitive earth closets with equally poorly maintained timber or metal panelled cubicles with damaged or non-existent doors. Complaints by the teachers include lack of privacy, especially for girls, boy urinating in public, pupils leaving school to go home for toilets, a need for separate urinals for boys to avoid contamination of girls' toilets, lack of privacy for girls, misuse of school latrines by adults, total lack of hygiene and danger of cross contamination, breeding grounds for mosquitoes, flies attracted by faeces cause contamination of food, generally poor construction of latrines and lack of maintenance.

The Committee has recorded its strong concern about these conditions and has asked our representative to bring these matters to the attention of the local Council and the Ministry of Education, stressing the serious danger to health and the totally unsatisfactory conditions for

women teachers and particularly the danger to young girls from both a health and moral standpoint. The recent outbreak of the mosquito borne Zika virus has given added significance to this problem.

The Committee has no funds to tackle this situation directly and it is difficult to identify just where the responsibility lies for the provision and maintenance of school toilet facilities. Is it the responsibility of the local Town Hall, the Ministry of Education, or the Ministry of Health? We are consulting other twinning groups and will continue to stress the urgency of resolving this problem.

8. Fundraising Activities

In February Poppy Buller once again organised a music event on behalf of the Link on 14th February at Norwich Arts Centre.

Headed by the well-known local group the Ougadougous, other performers included Himazas playing ukuleles led by Link Executive member Tony Bailey. The event was successful raising almost £1000. Link Chair Dave Trevanion, and Link committee members, Hilary King and husband Chris, Rhys Jenkins, and Brenda Gayton organised a successful bucket collection after the concert.

Tony Bailey also organised what he called 'A Ukulele Riverboat Shuffle' on the River Bure from Horning which raised £614.00 and a Pub Quiz at the Micawber Pub in Pottergate (£86.00). Tony also raised £94.00 at a concert at Falcon Junior School.

Link Treasurer Sue Thomas, supported by Link member Simon Nobbs, organised a sponsored Bike Ride which raised £629.00.

9. Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign.

We continue our membership of the Nicaragua Solidarity Campaign which is the national voluntary organisation linked with Nicaragua.

The annual meeting of representatives of UK towns linked with Nicaragua took place in London on 21st November. There were eight twin towns represented. The meeting was also attended by the Nicaragua Ambassador to Britain, Guiselle Morales. The Link was represented by Secretary, Ralph Gayton.

The Secretary raised the problem of the state of school latrines faced by our schools. While none of the other groups present faced similar problems the meeting agreed to contact the Ministry of Education and NSC will circulate further information as it becomes available.

The meeting also agreed to find out and circulate more information about 'Charity Checkout' and other similar websites such as www.giveasyoulive.com, www.easyfundraising.org.uk, www.everyclick.com.

10. Acknowledgements

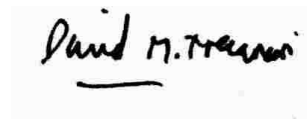
As always in a voluntary organisation such as the Link, many people are involved in all sorts of ways and it is right and proper that their contribution should be recognised and acknowledged. Most important is the continued support of our own members. Without their support we could achieve very little. We are always ready and anxious to welcome new members to help us

with what we do.

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

Our thanks also go to the teachers at the scholarship schools and the staff at the Alcaldia and everyone else who has any dealings with our project under the leadership of our representative, Carmela Hernandez.

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

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "David M. Trauer".

Chairperson

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Ralph Cord".

Secretary

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