In the Spring of 1991 Jim Burchell, John Mahler and I caught up at my apartment on North 12th St. in Newark. Each of us had spent time in Nicaragua, seeing first hand the devastation and heartbreak of war - a U.S.-sponsored war fueled by ignorance and fear. But we also knew the other side of Nicaragua. People with a wicked sense of humor (and no shortage of jokes). A culture of community you could see every evening at dusk as neighbors chatted and kids played. A revolution proud of its accomplishments in education, healthcare and respect for human dignity.

This winter, I am proud to have come back from Nicaragua again, this time as part of the PeaceWorks January 2017 Delegation. Ten of us traveled throughout Nicaragua to renew friendships, build solidarity and distribute $46,000 in support to our local partners. This report is rooted in the stories we heard and the friendship we experienced.

Much like that meeting on North 12 St. when Jim, John and I founded PeaceWorks 25 years ago, this delegation report won’t shy away from enormous challenges and heartbreaks our Nicaraguan partners face. But we hope you will also feel the other Nicaragua -- the one we so passionately love and whose people we so greatly admire.

PeaceWorks delegations are a collective effort, like those who contributed articles for this report. But we are especially grateful to Diane Sterner who has not only organized every step of PeaceWorks delegations for the past decade, she is our community’s most important ambassador. Our partners trust PeaceWorks because they trust Diane. She knows how to listen, she is gracious and she is smart. So much of what we learn about Nicaragua is because of her talents and work. For that, we are all deeply grateful. Gracias, compañera.

Denis Johnston, PeaceWorks President
Inhijambia means “warrior woman” in one of Nicaragua’s indigenous languages. The group works with the street children of the sprawling capital city of Managua, providing shelter, counseling, education and training to get young girls and boys off the dangerous streets.

We heard from a few of the older children who told shocking stories of drug, mental, physical and sexual abuse. Street children are often exploited sexually or physically to make money for adults. In contrast, we saw the bright, cheerful bedrooms of the girls’ dormitory that PeaceWorks helped fund, adorned with furniture and mirrors from PeaceWorks shipments. Girls as young as 7 or 8 years old who are trying to get off the streets can stay until age 18. After age 18, they may live in one of Inhijambia’s group homes until they can find a safe and stable home.

In the music room, the kids sang beautiful songs for us in a variety of languages. The dance class exhibited classic, Latin rhythm, and typical national dances in costumes the students made themselves. The children learn the significance of the dances - from lively Atlantic coast dances to more sedate Pacific coast dances and more - and how they fit into their culture. The day we were there, one of the dancers, Rosa, who had previously received a scholarship to a dance school, passed the final exam that will enable her to enroll in a professional dance program. Everyone was thrilled for her!

We also visited Mateare on the outskirts of Managua where houses are being built for three Inhijambia graduates, all of whom went on to become Inhijambia street educators, and their children. They were very grateful to Inhijambia Director Emeritus Mirna Sánchez and PeaceWorks Board Member Micha Loughlin who raised $23,000 for the land and construction of two of the houses. PeaceWorks is determined to help raise another $6200 to complete the house for the third young woman, Ingrid. Soon, all three will have a safe place for their kids to live and grow.

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Our visit to La Mariposa in San Juan de la Concepcion began with a wonderful treat—a colorful display of song and dance by the children of Los Pipitos. This first ever festival was organized to coincide with our delegation visit and to celebrate three years of program success. Los Pipitos works with thirty-seven local disabled children and their families who could not otherwise afford physical therapy or special education. The majority of the children have cerebral palsy, physical paralysis, and Down’s Syndrome.

After the performances concluded, we walked to the Los Pipitos building where we were given updates on the program and a tour of the PT room and equipment, which included a new massage table, balance balls, a large mirror to practice facial expressions and sounds, mats, and foam rollers. This equipment allows the physical therapist to work in a very dynamic way with the children by providing for a greater variety of exercises. In addition to the physical, water, and horse therapy available, the children are taught arts and crafts to help with movement and learning new skills.

Although the program grew last year, there are still 16 more children on the waiting list who can’t join the program yet because of limited staff. Future goals include the construction of a new building to house the program (due to start in February) and hiring an additional physical therapist to better serve all children in need.

The day we visited the turtle nesting station on the Isla Juan Venado Nature Reserve, our host Marvin Hernandez let us know that 25 baby turtles had hatched that morning and that we would get to help release them at sundown. The staff works with the local community to provide employment, while protecting the vulnerable turtles and their eggs.

During nesting season, the turtles climb up the beach until they are above the high tide line. Then they dig a hole in the sand with their back flippers and deposit their eggs. When the group’s nighttime patrols find a turtle laying eggs, they collect the eggs and store them in sacks filled with sand. They try to keep the eggs at 28 degrees centigrade or lower to try to assure that half the hatchlings will be male, since temperature determines the sex of the hatchling. This season, they have found six leatherback turtle nests with 318 eggs, the first leatherback nests in four years. They also found 80 Olive Ridley turtle nests with 6,265 eggs. 3,542 have hatched and been liberated so far between July and January. We were happy to participate in this effort and, as the sun set, we were able to watch 25 new little hatchlings ride off into the waves.
FEDICAMP, working with 21 agricultural communities in the states of Madriz and Estelí, continues to experience the terrible effects of climate change. In 12 of the past 15 years the area has been in drought, which devastates its major crops: corn and beans.

Working with the reality of climate change, FEDICAMP and its community organizers are facilitating crop diversification including sweet potatoes and yucca, and have distributed thousands of orange, banana, mango and other seedlings, all of which are more drought tolerant. They are introducing irrigation systems tailored to available water sources: including gravity feed, combustion and electric pump systems. They are bringing technologies such as greenhouses, rainfall catchment technology, efficient wood burning stoves and ovens, and solar panels to community farmers.

Under FEDICAMP’s guidance, communities are building seed banks, some with direct PeaceWorks funding, and implementing training in seed preservation and natural pest control.

We visited the small, remote community of El Zapote in the municipality of San Juan de Limay, located over 3900 feet above sea level, where farmers implement FEDICAMP technologies including greenhouses and gravity feed water systems constructed with PeaceWorks financial assistance, and where we helped plant onion seedlings. We were rewarded with a lunch of chicken soup cooked over a wood burning stove at a farmer’s home, perched on the edge of the mountaintop, affording a postcard-picture view of the valley below and mountain upon mountain fading into the distance.

The sign outside the door proudly reads: Las mujeres tenemos derecho a una vida libre de violencia. Women have the right to live a life free of violence. As we walked through that door, we entered a world of welcoming and calm, kindness and beauty. The rooms, simply and neatly decorated, are separated by open trellis walls. We saw bicycles which had just been delivered from the latest PeaceWorks’ container.

The organization offers daily drop-in services and helps empower domestic violence victims by teaching them self-esteem, sharing knowledge and sometimes even teaching them martial arts! They offer counselling in birth control, reproductive rights, HIV/AIDS prevention, gender identity, breast cancer awareness, and legal support. Some women even get micro loans, averaging $100. The staff teaches women how to be advocates and have trained 20 women who are mediators working with the courts.

Axayacatl also has income generation projects for women in the countryside. We travelled to a farm where the woman farmer was given baby animals, including chickens and peligueys (a hybrid of goat and sheep), to start a business. To get help from Axayacatl, these women must attend classes and eventually pass on livestock offspring to other women.

But there is still so much work for Axayacatl to do. That same day, the headline in the paper reported that six women had been beaten to death by their partners. Axayacatl needs your help as they continue to provide refuge and support, woman to woman.