

Development Education Work in Nicaragua & Canada: *Casa Canadiense* — A Crazy Dream That Works!

By Jennifer N. Costanza

On September 17, 2003, Amanda Procter visited York University to report on the work of Casa Canadiense. Her presentation was sponsored by the Centre for Research on Latin America and the Caribbean (CERLAC) and International Development Studies Programme (IDS).

Casa Canadiense - the *Casa*, as supporters affectionately call it - is a Canadian volunteer organization involved in community-support and development education work in Nicaragua and Canada. The *Casa* is currently celebrating a year-long "Tenth Anniversary" campaign co-chaired by Padre Miguel D'Escoto (former Nicaraguan foreign minister during the Sandinista government) and Richard F. Johnston (President of Toronto's Centennial College and former Ontario NDP MPP).

Amanda Procter, the *Casa* coordinator in Nicaragua, began her talk with an important clarification—the *Casa* is not an international development project in the traditional sense. The group centers its activities on development education—educating and learning in Canada and in Nicaragua about how North-South economic and political relations condition and restrict possibilities for solving problems of under- and skewed development.

For just over a decade, the activities of the *Casa* have helped to enable cross-cultural educational experiences for Canadians going to Nicaragua. As Procter explained, "the idea is that if a young person visits a third world country, she can learn something new and broaden her horizons. The experience can change her life and worldview forever." Hence, the *Casa* acts as a Canadian gateway to

Nicaragua's people, culture, and environmental plenitude.

The *Casa's* founders purchased the Managua house (its office in the country's capital) in the early 1990s to serve as a simple dwelling to welcome and lodge visiting Canadian groups and individuals. It has since evolved into something much grander, facilitating visits for groups from more than 20 schools and religious organizations across Canada.

The *Casa* acts as a liaison between Canadian groups and local Nicaraguan communities, helping them to form and sustain ongoing relationships. After a brief welcome and orientation at the *Casa*, groups of volunteers move on to stay with families or at hostels in small communities. Often, a visiting group will engage in a small development project with their host community. Construction projects are particularly popular, Procter noted, because when Nicaraguans and Canadians work together and share daily routines they undergo a rich cross-cultural experience. They form bonds and friendships that help to enhance and broaden their world outlook. All *Casa*-facilitated projects of this nature, including the travel costs of Canadian visitors, depend on participants' fund-raising efforts in Canada.

The *Casa's* level of interaction with any given group of visitors varies. The *Casa* offers help with logistical arrangements and sometimes can aid groups in formulating a budget and itinerary. Often the *Casa* will help orient a group to both the country and the host community. Most visiting groups spend one or two weeks in Nicaragua during the months from May to September. However, visitors

who wish to stay longer may receive assistance from the *Casa* as well. For example, *Casa Canadiense* has aided members of the faith-based organization One World to organize stays of up to two months.

Although *Casa Canadiense's* primary mission is development education, the list of local community development projects that Canadian groups have completed—with the *Casa's* help—is impressive. Schools, summer camps, libraries, a medical center, a preschool, community computer classes, and youth literacy classes top the list. Additionally, the *Casa* helps channel funds raised by Canadian groups to local organizations. One Canadian woman, Procter said, has thus far raised \$15,000, donated towards the construction of two schools and a well in the small village of El Roble.

The schools and community programs mounted in Nicaragua certainly attest to the success of the *Casa* and their Canadian collaborators and supporters. Procter, however, passionately believes that the *Casa's* true impact is mainly seen in the lives of those Canadians who have come to Nicaragua with open hearts and minds, returning to Canada as quite different people. For many Canadians, a brief stay in Nicaragua can become the beginning of a life-long commitment to volunteerism and global justice.

Procter can attest to this. She first visited Nicaragua in 1997. She returned three years later, and found out that the *Casa Canadiense* needed someone to take the place of its then-coordinator who had resigned and returned to Canada. Procter rose to the task and has committed herself to the *Casa* ever since. Proc-

ter's enthusiasm for Nicaragua and the *Casa* came across clearly during her presentation. She infected the audience with her love for Nicaragua, inducing some attendees to ask how they too could visit the *Casa*.

So, how did the *Casa* become such a phenomenon? Procter's response is simple: "our *Casa Canadiense* is a crazy dream that works!"



About the speaker:

Amanda Procter is House Coordinator for *Casa Canadiense* in Managua, Nicaragua.

Casa Canadiense:

In Canada:
34 Pauline Avenue
Toronto, ON, M6H 3M8
Tel: (416) 532-5199
E-Mail : info@thecasa.ca

In Nicaragua:
Apdo E.C. #76 Managua, Nicaragua
E-mail: casacana@sdnnic.org.ni
Tel/Fax: 011 (505) 249-5542

Webpage: <http://www.thecasa.ca/>

Background readings:

Growing Trend of Educational Travel:
<http://www.cowac.org/hosteltwist.htm>

Report on an experience with a Casa Canadiense project:
<http://www.antithesis.ca/nica.html>

Casa Canadiense cumple un año más

(Spanish language article from the Nicaraguan newspaper *La Prensa*; reproduced below.)

Por: Antonia Calero Sequeira
antonia.calero@laprensa.com.ni
(*La Prensa* / O. Valenzuela, Lunes 11 De Agosto Del 2003 / Edición No. 23177)

Representantes de diversos grupos comunitarios celebraron el décimo aniversario de la Casa Canadiense.

Expresando sus experiencias y logros, diversos grupos comunitarios del país

celebraron el décimo aniversario de la Fundación Casa Canadiense, que durante los diez años de trabajo en el país ha promovido la solidaridad entre Canadá y Nicaragua.

Durante el encuentro Amanda Procter, Coordinadora de la Casa Canadiense dijo sentirse satisfecha por los logros obtenidos en estos años.

"Coordinamos trabajos voluntarios para jóvenes canadienses que quieren conocer Nicaragua más a fondo y financiamos proyectos comunitarios con contrapartes locales como las brigadas odontológicas", apuntó Procter.

Los pobladores del municipio de Niquinohomo son beneficiarios desde hace varios años por la Casa Canadiense, principalmente en la construcción de preescolares en algunas comarcas como El Pocito, La Estrella y La Hoja Chigua.

Niños Beneficiados

Para Julio Picado, vicealcalde de Niquinohomo, la construcción de los preescolares ha beneficiado a más de 120 niños que antes no tenían acceso a un centro educativo.

"Antes los pequeños tenían que caminar varios kilómetros para asistir a una escuela por lo que no viven en el casco urbano, agradecemos la colaboración de la casa canadiense, ya que hasta hemos celebrado varias promociones en los pre-escolares", manifestó el vicealcalde.

Programa Educativo

La Casa Canadiense también impulsa y ha beneficiado con programas educativos mediante la Asociación Las Tías del departamento de León, que surgieron en el año de 1989 conformadas por las comerciantes que venden en los diferentes mercados de la ciudad de León, con el fin de sacar a los niños que viven en las calles.

Según Cándida Méndez, presidenta de la Asociación, en los años de labor varios jóvenes se han capacitado en carpintería, electricidad y albañilería.

La Casa Canadiense, también ha apoyado a los pobladores de este departamento por medio de las brigadas odontológicas.



The CERLAC Bulletin

is a new publication series of the Centre for Research on Latin America and the Caribbean at York University. The series disseminates, in concise format, the principal content of informational presentations hosted by the Centre.

Contact CERLAC

Email: cerlac@yorku.ca

Webpage:

<http://www.yorku.ca/cerlac/>