

Hi everyone!

The one year mark of my service is coming up. The slow pace of life here means the days often seem like they drag along, but I keep being surprised to find that I have run out of toothpaste yet again.

The big news these days is the new road from my site to the nearest city has finally been completed. The road crews were obnoxious while they passed through the community, but now the road is so fast! A year ago it took almost 1 1/2 hours to get to Estelí, and now on a good day it is more like 35min..

I realized recently that I have become immune to the poverty that surrounds me here. Everyday life has become normal to me, so I don't notice the obvious things. I started making a mental list of the things that should shock me. People here take cold bucket baths, use a latrine, eat beans every day, often three times a day, clothes are washed on a rock, no one has a sink, cows are milked by hand, kids play barefoot in the gravel, they don't know that raisins come from grapes, many cannot read or write, and even those who do spell worse than I do, 6 people might live in a house the size of your living room, women spend their days cooking over smoky chimney-less wood fires without, sixth grade graduation marks the end of formal education for many kids, chickens, pigs, cats and dogs wander through the house, floors are made of dirt, and I have to give a few days notice before doing pig deworming, because otherwise people won't have the \$.50 to pay for the shot.

Medicine is an area that is certainly lacking here. Some things don't seem to happen like they used to. My host mother's sister died of an ear infection 40 years ago. I hadn't even known that was possible. It is such a common thing and so easy to treat. A conversation I had about the home birth movement in the United States with a local woman revealed that for the last 15 or 20 years, she has suffered from the lack of stitches after giving birth to 4 children assisted by her mother in law. Naturally, she thought American women were foolish for going backwards. Now, nearly all women here go to the hospital, though no one else is allowed in the birthing room. But not all the tragic stories happened years ago. Another volunteer went to a local Health Center when she got sick. Her host family informed her that the pills she had been given were great. A few days later she looked up information on the pills, only to learn that they had been banned in the US since the 90's because they cause dangerous long term liver damage. I doubt this was an isolated incident. It is no wonder people here don't trust the doctors. Even though I don't have much confidence in the doctors either, I find myself recommending that people visit them anyway. Self medication is worse. A few months ago, a three year old girl died in a neighboring community after her mother overdosed her on a cold medicine. Just a couple weeks ago a hemophiliac 6 year old died after falling during a game. Dengue fever (also known as breakback fever for the extreme body aches it causes) is on the rise in Nicaragua, but fortunately there haven't been any cases in my community, and malaria is nearly unheard of.

There are a group of dirty kids that come to my house most days to demand paper and pencils to make drawings. We have many repetitive conversations about the things in my room. My possessions and photos from home fascinate them. A typical conversation about a family photo might go like this: "Who is that?" My mom. "What is her name?" Colleen "Is that your house?" no "Who is that?" My sister "Who is that?" My mom. Repeat a day or two later. Another popular question is "whose is that?" while pointing to my things one by one. I try to cut down on the repetition of our conversations by pointing out that everything except the bed, stove, and shelves are mine, but they just cannot seem to accept that one person could have so many things.

On a more positive note, the teachers at the elementary school planned a school/community field trip on Halloween (which isn't celebrated here). They invited me along, so I got to see how trips get planned Nicaraguan style. It was sort of like one of those family vacations where you get lost and everyone is telling Dad where to go and Mom is asking every other pedestrian for directions and getting a different answer from everyone. We had been on the road for an hour or two before the driver mentioned he didn't know the itinerary. But we made it to most of the planned stops, including a famous battle field, a boat tour, a lake beach, and a zoo. It poured buckets the entire time at the zoo, but everyone had fun getting wet and seeing the bedraggled parrots and lions and monkeys.

I have recently started a community library project at our local primary school. I presented the project to the parents and teachers this week, so the Parents Council can hopefully help out with writing the proposals and getting price quotes and local donations. Hopefully, USAID will approve a grant I will be writing to take care of most of the costs. It shouldn't be too expensive, as we already have a building. We just need to build an interior wall, install a light, change the lock, and paint the place and it will be ready for shelves, tables, chairs, books, and maybe even a couple computers. I apologize to those of you who received emails from International Book Project without any warning from me. I should explain that it is a legitimate organization with an official partnership agreement with Peace Corps that I contacted in order to receive donated used books from the US. I hope that some of you are able help out with the shipping costs! If anyone knows of any sources at home for free or low cost books in Spanish, or maybe just has an old dictionary that you aren't using any more, please send it my way! I will be home very soon (for most of the month of December) and I would like to take back as many books as I can to avoid shipping costs. Also, the community baseball team really wants gloves and a bamboo bat (is there such a thing?) But if you have sports equipment in good condition that you want to give away, I will take it!

I can't wait to be home for Christmas and see some of you! In the meantime, Happy Thanksgiving!

-Erin