

# Nurses tour CoDev projects in Nicaragua and Honduras

## Women's organization in Nicaragua doing valiant job,

Jane Sustrik reports



UNA members on the tour.

Top: Jane Sustrik, Heather Wayling

Bottom: Erin Zalasky, Donica Geddes.

A trip to Nicaragua... an opportunity of a lifetime! That was my immediate thought when I learned I would be traveling to Nicaragua to see how our donations to the María Elena Cuadra Movement of Working and Unemployed Women (MEC) are being used.

UNA has donated to MEC for the past three years. We donate through CoDevelopment Canada (CoDev), which is a small non-profit NGO that is working to form partnerships between groups in Canada and like-minded organizations in Latin America. CoDev has partnerships with more than 16 unions and groups in BC, Alberta and with 23 community groups, women's organizations and unions in Latin America. Some common threads run through the broad range of projects - gender equity, women's empowerment and labour rights. These are central themes in the work CoDev supports.

Four UNA members were selected for the trip - two Executive Board Members (Heather Wayling and myself) and two members-at-large, chosen through a letter submission process (Donica Geddes from Local 204 and Erin Zalasky from Local 301). Our trip was a joint venture with the Health Sciences Association of British Columbia (HSA-BC).

## Far beyond what I thought it would be

Donica Geddes reports on the tour



Donica with MEC coordinator Sandra Ramos.

Below: Donica visits at the farm.



MEC banner in appreciation: "Your International Solidarity is Engraved in the Heart of our People"



The first leg of our excursion took us to Honduras to view the CODEMUH project which HSA-BC sponsors. CODEMUH is a women's collective for maquila workers. In Latin America, maquilas are factories that mainly produce garments for export. There are over 135,000 maquila workers in Honduras. These are what most people envision when they think of sweatshops with poverty-level wages, long hours and no unions. While not all maquilas are dark and dirty, most violate internationally recognized worker rights and occupational health and safety standards.

CODEMUH has thirty-two teams in Honduras that reach out and provide workshops to maquila workers. The range of topics is broader than you might expect. It includes self-esteem, health, civil participation, sexuality, AIDS, and rights. They also offer psychotherapy workshops for women who have suffered emotional and physical violence.

The poverty in Honduras struck every one of us on the tour. For me, I felt a great deal of shock, astonishment, frustration and sadness. A vast number of people live in terrible conditions. There is little recycling in Latin America, so the



stench of burning garbage and plastic fills the air and your lungs. Filthy water pools on the edge of roads and infants play in it wearing only a diaper and t-shirt. Sights like this will be forever engrained in my mind.

After a week in Honduras, it was on to a bus for a grueling 13-hour ride to Managua, Nicaragua. Nicaragua is home to the project UNA supports. Maria Elena Cuadra Movement of Working and Unemployed Women (MEC) is a leading advocate for women's rights and labour rights in free trade zones. These dedicated people provide health education, financial support, leadership training, and legal and human rights advocacy to women working in Nicaragua's free trade

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**T**he women have very little education. The funds they are given go an incredibly long way. It centers around the workers' rights for the maquila workers, but they often have other problems, with their families, or their children, so it's not just labour rights. There's "mini" health therapy, psychological, social therapy and they have programs on sexually transmitted diseases and birth control. It's very basic stuff. They meet just outside the factory in a little restaurant. Some of the women still have to lie to their husbands about where they are going and what they are doing."

Donica Geddes works with hard-to-care for patients at the Rosehaven long-term care facility in Camrose. She has a family, and the kids' basketball and Ukrainian dancing, the whole ball of wax, but she still finds time to be the president of her UNA Local #204. She applied to represent UNA on the tour to Nicaragua and Honduras. She was selected and off she went for a completely new and eye-opening experience.

"It went far beyond what I thought it would be," Donica says. "There's a need. Nurses are called to meet needs, and there is a need in these two countries. They are obviously suffering. We can help, to learn more and networking to make others aware. It's a humanitarian need," she says.

Donica was impressed by the work she saw the women's organization Maria Elena Cuadra doing.

"Seeing how they network, how they use the funds they have, they use it very efficiently," she says.

Donica learned a lot about the history of the region and the struggles the people have faced over recent decades. Coming from a farm background, she was particularly interested in

a visit to a farm, but she found it startling to find houses roughly built with slabs of wood and dirt floors. The group of farmers was getting by with chickens, pigs and seeds, some of it provided with international assistance. But "their golden dream" she said, was a milk cow to have milk for their kids.

In the city, Donica was on the tour of one of the factories, a company called Cupid. "All they made was underwear... I'd never seen so much underwear in my life." But she noted that there were many familiar names, "Sears, Ralph Lauren, Wal-Mart... they were making products for all these companies."

"We can put pressure on these companies," Donica says. "They do know that there is international awareness of these sweat shops. Public pressure will be a lot more effective."

The tour group met with some of the women who do the work.

"We heard a lot of their stories. They weren't shy," Donica says. "This one woman had a disability with her arm. She was about 21. Her name was Lourdes. She cried as she told us about the repetitive work she does with that arm, she can't lift it above her shoulder now. It's from the way she is working."

"I'm a good worker," Lourdes told them. "I do lots and I am very loyal, but they are saying that the problem is not caused by work."

Donica says that some day she would like to go back, roll up her sleeves and continue the fight for social justice. ■



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zone. The premise behind MEC's work is the promotion of dignity and respect for women workers.

Our first order of business was to attend a meeting of about 1200 women maquila workers to address the government's employment policy with a focus on gender. I was thrilled and honoured to bring greetings on behalf of UNA – some of it in Spanish. Apparently, my Spanish was not understandable and I was told it needed CPR!

We managed to visit two garment maquilas, one tobacco maquila and one worker-owned maquila. This helped put into perspective the working conditions within a maquila. The majority of maquila workers are women, who are poor, young (mostly between the ages of 18 and 35 years of age), and often single mothers raising families. They do not have much education either. The average Nicaraguan has only 4.5 years of schooling!

Maquila workers face many challenges - one of the most difficult is repetitive strain injuries. We saw what they do, for example, in manufacturing a pair of shorts. One worker sews a pocket on; another worker sews one side seam, and so on. Each worker performs one tedious task hundreds of times each day. They must work very quickly and there is no time to recover from injuries.

MEC is educating the workers about the dangers of repetitive strain and helping the workers set up some form of occupational health and safety system in their factories.

We had several scheduled events with MEC. We met with the lawyers and staff of MEC's Mediation Centre. We visited a beneficiary of MEC's micro project, and we dropped in on MEC's "back-yard" project. Seeing these projects first-hand gave us a more complete understanding of the work MEC is doing. We could see that MEC has earned a high level of trust with women factory workers and a respectful relationship with government officials and factory owners.

We thought we had seen poor conditions in Honduras. But Nicaragua was poorer. A trip to the Managua dump, situated right next to Lake Managua, revealed what is called home for 7000 Nicaraguans. This was stunning, overwhelming and gut wrenching. The poverty is extreme. There are serious deficiencies in terms of education, sanitation is lacking and there is far too little basic health care. We could see that this is a country full of struggles. Again, these images will be etched in my mind forever.

We came away feeling strongly that MEC's work is really helping people. Our donations are worthwhile, valuable and deeply appreciated. We are helping to make things better and we absolutely must continue our support.

Thank you to UNA for providing me with this insightful and valuable opportunity. It has changed my outlook on life! ✨