

Whilst in Nicaragua, I worked as part of a team of British and National volunteers, fourteen of us in total. In the mornings we worked as one large group. We worked to finish constructing and decorating a restaurant, designed to support local producers and artisans, whilst also creating jobs in the community. We also worked in two local school gardens to improve their yield and increase security measures. These gardens have an educational purpose, teaching the school children about food security, as well as supplementing their diet in the meals provided by the schools. In the afternoons we split off into smaller groups, some teaching English in the local school, some working in a 'Casa Materna' (a home for pregnant women from rural communities to stay in for their last month of pregnancy, where they could be close to medical facilities and supervision), and some organising community events and workshops. The most successful project I worked on, with two other British volunteers, was to create a ten-minute documentary. We developed a storyboard, and collected and edited material including: interviews, subtitles and music. In addition, everyone in the team had a 'role' to fill, mine was to write weekly reports on the progress of all projects. These were used as a tool in monitoring and evaluating the success of our work.

Unfortunately, we encountered some communication problems with the local partner organisation that had set up the projects we would be working on. This meant we were often not informed of the objectives of certain projects, or how they would benefit the community, and began to feel disillusioned with the work. Our complaints fell on deaf ears, so instead we took our own initiative. I discussed the idea of knowledge and cultural exchange sessions with our team leader, and as a result we started holding weekly learning sessions between the British and National volunteers. This helped to facilitate our own personal development, as we shared ideas and knowledge of global issues such as: poverty, gender inequality and global warming. One particular project the partner organisation had organised for us was football training. However, as this was scheduled in the heat of the day, it was a complete failure as no children wanted to participate. Along with another volunteer, I mind-mapped alternative options, working with local volunteers to provide us relevant knowledge on where there was a need for our services. We came up with plans to start arts and crafts classes, and to hold anti-Machismo (sexism) workshops with the local school children. When we propositioned these ideas to the partner organisation, they were happy with our suggestions. Through these projects we taught over 50 children to make friendship bracelets, allowed them to practice their drawing and painting skills, and engaged them in debates over issues such as littering and gender stereotypes. I was also part of another side project we came up with, trying to link in with the work in the school gardens to have a more long-term impact. We researched and put together a presentation on nutrition and organic farming methods, then presented it to children and parents in four rural communities. Overall the work we did left me feeling a little frustrated, as it was not what I had expected from the placement. However, the progress we made as a team in overcoming these issues, and my own personal learning was invaluable.

Aside from the first week of training, I lived with a host family and one other British volunteer for the whole placement. This was definitely the highlight of

the whole program. My host parents were the kindest and most generous people you could come across and made every single volunteer feel welcome as part of the community. I learnt to cook some traditional Nicaraguan dishes, and in return, taught my host mother to cook some things we regularly eat in the UK (using her oven for the first time!). We ate meals together as a family and exchanged our experiences and languages, and our house was open to both British and Nicaraguan volunteers at all times of the day, so we truly were one big happy family. As a group, the volunteers worked very well together, and we socialised every evening after work, sometimes celebrating birthdays together, and going away on short trips at the weekend. What I treasure most of all from this placement, is the friends and family I found in Nicaragua. I hope to keep in touch with them always and perhaps even to return some day soon!



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