

## Dreaming the Impossible... And Organizing

"Some say that Jesus came like a sunbeam through clear glass,  
or perhaps stained glass, giving him earth tones,  
showing him as one of us."

John P. McMamee, 2008

Four of us sat down under a mango tree in Arenal the afternoon of February 26, 1996 -- two primary teachers, the coordinator of the community's agricultural cooperative, and myself, a Jesuit who had come to Arenal during Nicaragua's popular revolution in 1988. For the four of us, the accomplishments of the revolution during the 1980s -- all but destroyed by the war imposed on us, and subsequent governments -- had given us a hope and confidence that we had never experienced before: education and health services available to all; land distributed among small producers for the production of basic food grains for all; freedom to meet and organize publicly without police and military repression; first steps toward affirming women's rights throughout society; the flourishing of popular Nicaraguan culture ... poetry, music, dance, art. All of this was being destroyed in the mid-90s, and we were determined to **protect and defend these accomplishments in the rural community of Arenal**. For us, these accomplishments were signs of Jesus' presence..."showing him as one of us."

We knew that, in the beginning, we would be on our own, but we committed ourselves to "**dreaming the impossible**." Just about all "solidarity" groups -- national and international -- had disappeared with the end of the revolution in 1990. We decided to concentrate initially on three efforts that were at the heart of the revolution: **education, health and food production**. With a growing network of friends in the community -- the **village** of Arenal has a population of 700 people; the **community** of Arenal (which includes 5 villages), 6,500 people -- we worked hard on improving the primary schools by motivating teachers, and encouraging students to remain in school. It was during this time that three young women of Arenal became our **first three university students**. We also initiated an **alternative reading program** for little ones in the community, introducing them to the wonders of reading. We tried to improve the local health center, organizing to ensure the presence of a doctor two or three days a week, and pressuring the government to provide more medicines. We worked to defend the community cooperative against former landlords who were trying to take back the lands of the cooperative by force; likewise, through the cooperative we initiated a **nutrition program** for children in the community.

Then **Hurricane Mitch** (1998) hit us...and put all hopes of "moving forward" on hold; once again, our principal struggle became one of survival. With the accomplishment and solidarity of friends and groups locally and from afar, by the year 2000 we were more or less back on our feet.

Around the year 2000, the women and men at the center of the mobilizing and organizing work in Arenal came to be known as **GRUDESA** (*Grupo de Solidaridad-Arenal*, the Arenal Solidarity Group). Around this time also, the work of GRUDESA shifted from "organizing projects" to "value orientation." We began thinking more "long-term" than "short-term." In making this shift, we discovered that **women and youth** were becoming more involved in the work of GRUDESA; traditional male adult leaders moved on to pursue more individual interests. GRUDESA also became more inclusive...breaking down barriers of religion and political party.

GRUDESA is maintaining its work in education (as of 2009 **there are 25 college graduates in Arenal**). In the area of health, we now have a **popular pharmacy and laboratory** -- managed by college students -- where community members can now acquire generic medicines, and receive basic medical examinations at minimum costs. In food production, and increasing number of small food producers in Arenal are now **cultivating basic food grains organically**, that is, with home-grown seed, organic fertilizer, and organic pesticides. In addition, GRUDESA's youth group has developed into one of the country's better **traditional Nicaraguan dance groups (Quetzalcoalt)**, invited to dance throughout Central America in solidarity with teachers, health workers, women workers, and war victims, and in Spain as part of a series of cultural exchanges with youth groups in Catalonia. Furthermore, a team of former college students has initiated a program of small loans to groups of women, strengthening the economic and organizing capacity of women throughout the community.

At the heart of these activities in the areas of education, health, food production, culture. and gender equality are the **values of solidarity, collaboration, and the desire and readiness to sacrifice oneself for the good of the community** that we lived through the popular revolution of the 1980s. We didn't pretend to "repeat history," but rather to translate the truly spiritual gift into our contemporary commitment; this is to make our community more viable in the midst of the individualism, selfishness, "market competition," and violence that surrounds us. In this struggle, we are strengthened by friends and groups throughout the world who share these values -- in **Central America, the Caribbean, Spain, Chile, Puerto Rico, West Virginia, North Carolina, New Orleans**, and elsewhere. Our common struggle unites us. We are also very aware of those who have made it

possible, historically, for us to maintain ourselves in the struggle today: the thousands of women and men who died to make our **popular revolution in Nicaragua** a reality; **Oscar Arnulfo Romero** who gave his life for his people; the thousands of women and men who **sacrificed their lives for the freedom of all our peoples** here in Latin America.

Throughout the year, in our efforts to deepen our commitment to the values of solidarity, collaboration, and sacrifice for the community, we frequently take days off to **reflect and discuss the lives and thought of these women and men**, without whom we would not be who we are today.

With Jesus we are convinced that the struggle to change our community and our society begins from below...organizing ourselves...beginning with the most marginalized, the most excluded...resisting all forms of domination...trying to guarantee the basic rights and needs of ALL...and, in the end, with Jesus and our community, accepting the consequences...because Jesus is "one of us."

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Rob Currie, S.J. - August, 2009