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VICS: Connecting with People in Nicaragua

Ashley Rerrie

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Connecting with People in Nicaragua

Ashley Rerrie



Ashley translating for Yamileth (right) during a visit with a school group

I moved to Nicaragua a month after I finished my Master's degree. It took me some time to learn how to adjust to a 9-5 job (although not a conventional 9-5) and to not be such an academic. It's been a huge learning curve and has taught me what a lot of the theories I learned in grad school look like in practice.

One of the people who has taught me a lot about development, community organizing, and empowerment is Yamileth Perez. Yamileth lives in a marginalized and historically stigmatized neighbourhood in Managua, and has been volunteering and organizing there since she was 11 years old.

Even though she didn't have the chance to finish school and spent years working in the local dump looking for scrap materials to recycle and sell to support her family, Yamileth went on to teach adult education classes for five years. Adults who hadn't finished school as children because they had to work came to her house from 6-8 p.m. and studied to graduate high school.

Yamileth's neighbourhood was also infamously violent. She met with gang members and community members to find ways to mitigate the violence – not by assigning blame, but by listening. She asked youth what they needed from the community and their answer was recreation. Without education, jobs, or opportunity, youth in her community wanted to find ways to have fun. So Yamileth started a soccer league in the community, offering her organizational skills in exchange for soccer lessons. Her soccer team was highly successful and she still has the trophies in her living room.

Yamileth also runs a fair trade organization called Esperanza en Acción, which works directly with artisans all over Nicaragua, and she continues to organize in her community. Her house is a community health centre, where people can come and get tested for malaria, dengue, and zika, take their blood pressure, and access a nebulizer. All of these services are offered for free.

Nicaraguan resilience

Yamileth always talks to students about how her neighbourhood isn't poor, but rather impoverished; impoverished by global systems of capitalism, consumerism, and affected by imperialism. She reminds me that poverty is created and maintained by those in power. But she also reminds me of the resilience of Nicaraguans, and how sometimes, even the act of surviving and thriving in spite of systems that oppress you is an act of resistance. Yamileth constantly reminds me that empowerment happens not in acts of charity and giving people things (houses, clothes, food), but in creating meaningful employment and finding dignified ways for people to provide for themselves.

Once, when giving a talk to visiting Canadian students, Yamileth said:

“Something I want you all to know is that Nicaraguans are magic. My people are magic. We have to be, to survive here. A Nicaraguan woman can make one bar of soap stretch to wash clothes, wash dishes, bathe children, and wash hair. We're resilient. If that's not magic, I don't know what is.”

I think about this often. I am living among people who make magic happen every single day.

Sharing deep connections

The first time I came here in 2012, I was taught about the concept of being with people and witnessing their struggles. I carry this idea with me. Sometimes bearing witness is hard. Sometimes it feels heavy – particularly when I'm working with communities every day



Ashley (centre) with Eloisa and Lola, the president and treasurer of the Santa Julia women's cooperative

and I'm still left feeling hopeless when there's a lack of water, food, or access to adequate resources. Sometimes it feels like no matter how hard I work, it's not enough. I work to process these feelings. What does it mean to hold other people's trauma, to see the violence they live with, and not lean away?

I try to remind myself that it's not always about what I'm doing. Sometimes being there to listen and to hear people's stories and struggles is validating. Listening, showing up, and being

present ... really being human with people. Connection is what people are looking for. And I've been given amazing opportunities to do just that.

From learning to make tortillas to getting my truck stuck in the middle of a river at 2:00 a.m., to throwing surprise parties for friends or sitting in a front porch and chatting, I've had the privilege of meeting incredible people and sharing deep connections with people. That has been, and will continue to be, the best part about being here. ■