

Culture Shocking

by Bob Saar



GRANADA, NICARAGUA

Culture shock is easier to imagine than to experience, because it is nothing more than a lack of experience. Like dining in foreign countries on a food stamp budget, the things on the plate sometimes look a little unsettling, but once tasted, can stir an unexpected desire to dig in with gusto.

The shock is always experienced by the visitors, not the home team. American ego-tourism enthusiasts seem culturally numb as they dash about in the Central American jungle, seeking fulfillment through spendy, trendy butterfly safaris, but their frantic antics don't churn local stomachs. The silly-looking togs and spindly knees poking from macho safari shorts may roll a few eyes, but Americans on the tourist trail don't spin local heads with their cultural oddities.

It's always the American visitors who have to adjust.

Down in Nicaragua, a small group of Americans walks along a dirt road that is little more than a pair of ruts gouged through a tropical tangle on the edge of Granada. Barbed wire runs down both sides of the lane, establishing boundaries between shacks and huts made of city flotsam. The Villa Esperanza, village of hope, is a chaotic scatter of homes that look like the awkward things

American children cobble together and call playhouses.

The two American men are there to assist an American woman who runs the small charity that buys the uniforms and shoes and books required to attend public school in Nicaragua; without help, these simple things are as far out of reach as the moon and stars are for the barrio families.

Trash lines the road, fills the potholes, floats in the many-colored waters that ooze from each shack; but the hardpan dirt yards are spotless and neat.

Like a smile, pride of ownership is a powerful cross-cultural symbol.

The American men eye the variegated tricklings as they drink water from plastic bottles. One man drains his, and he looks around for a place to put it, a cultural movement, seeking a trash can for the disposable container. He has no illusions about spotting a recycling bin.

The other man in the group watches him, glances at the rubbish in the road, and waits for the toss, but the man with the bottle shrugs and puts the plastic thing into his pants pocket when the group moves on.

The garbage is culturally shocking, much more so than a Morpho butterfly, but not shocking enough to enable an American to break his own cultural mores

and live like the natives by recycling in the streets.

The woman leading the group is suddenly swarmed by small children who bolt from the cool dark hovels and hug her legs, squealing, "Kathy-Kathy-Kathy!"

Kathy Adams is the founder and director of Empowerment International, a nonprofit group that provides financial and emotional support to children and their families in Nicaragua and Costa Rica by buying the uniforms, shoes and supplies required to attend public school in the two countries.

Adams comes down here about four times each year with community members and parents in both countries, and while many of her nearly 300 children live in the barrios, her focus remains on getting street kids off the streets and into school.

Josefina and Luisa are smiling examples of Adams' mission.

"I saw Josefina on the street one day last year when we were buying uniforms for the kids in the program," Adams explained. "When we told her they were for school, she asked if she could go, too."

Adams told the seven-year-old that she wanted to meet Josefina's mother first, but the woman lives in Costa Rica and rarely calls. Josefina and her sister Luisa, 11, live

with their grandmother, Maria.

The father is nowhere to be found.

Josefina and Luisa work in the teeming streets of the Mercado, the marketplace in Granada. Adams knows that street kids are at high risk, and so Grandmother Maria asked if both girls could enter the EI program.

Maria came to the EI house yesterday to thank Adams for saving her grandchildren from lives filled with prostitution, drugs and disease.

"Life is so hard for us," Maria said to Adams. "It was a gift from God that you showed up in Josefina's life."

Adams hugged Maria and they held hands while the old woman wept openly.

"She's speaking from a place of non-victimization," Adams explained. "She's asking for nothing. She's just grateful."

The grandmother smiled and said that she is so proud of her girls that she won't allow them to work on the streets anymore. Adams was pleased but unpretentious.

"We didn't have anything to do with that, except to give them the chance," she said.

Back in the Villa Esperanza, more children rush Adams; their mothers come to thank her as well. One woman appears to be more reserved; she has come

from a neighboring barrio to ask if her own child might fit under Adams' wing.

"All the adjacent barrios are waiting their turn now," Adams explained. "Hopefully, next year we can help them. It's just a matter of money now."

And so, there is hope on this safari, through the Villa Esperanza. The barrio people hope that Kathy Adams and her volunteer staff return. They hope that more children can go to school next year. And although they don't think in capitalistic terms, they hope Adams finds more money for the basic operational needs of maintaining a charity on foreign soil.

Adams has her own hopes, too, including a dream that she can find more Americans who want to come down here and meet the children they are helping - almost 300 are now in her program - and experience a little culture shock on a very different kind of ecotourist expedition.

And in that hope, we are all equal.

Empowerment International is based in Lyons. You can visit the website at www.empowermentinternational.org

Editor's Note: Next week, part three of this three-part series.