



## *Richmond Hill Reflections*

**“Caring is Sharing”** (Talk given by Melissa Carter)

January 20, 2019; Second Sunday after Epiphany

Reading: Luke 4:14-21

Most of you will not know me as I am relatively new to Richmond Hill United Church. I like to keep a low profile in general, but today I am going to tell you how my little ol’ self ended up working and living in Nicaragua for 6 months in 2017 through Mission and Service. Now, my arrival was a lot less dramatic than Jesus’ at the synagogue. I mean, my Spanish was super rudimentary making basic interactions effortful. So initially, it was a lot of observation, non-verbal gestures like smiles and fist pumps, and small conversations at recess to communicate with everyone. There were no announcements on my part. Nevertheless, these simple actions laid the foundation to building a partnership with all the people who through the principal “caring is sharing” transformed foreign soil into my second home.

At the heart of my time in Nicaragua lies Los Quinchos, a school situated in Barrio San Judas, Managua. Many students come from very impoverished, difficult home lives. They attend the morning school in order to have the afternoons free to work - an effort to help support their families. Nevertheless, every time they entered class, they always greeted me with a hello; some even added a kiss on the cheek, a practice that surprised me given the stringent guidelines of teacher-student relationships within the Canadian school system. Clearly, interactions between teachers and students were more open, a fact which was evident even before my Spanish improved. Teachers engaged with students on a more personal, human level: they could give students hugs, a pat on the back, shoulder squeeze whether for comfort or for encouragement. Throwing aside my trepidation, I decided to do as Nicaraguans did; it was an interesting experience to be able to connect more freely. In opening up with the students about my life, the students opened up as well. Although Nicaragua is the second most impoverished nation in the western hemisphere after Haiti, the students have so much pride in their culture and country. They were my own personal tourist information centre, and they loved teaching me Nicaraguan expressions to incorporate into my speech. They tried to teach me to dance their folkloric dances, explaining their histories and origins. For my birthday, they craftily uncovered my favourite cartoon character and, to my surprise and delight, had a piñata made for me. On the flip side, they wanted to hear about life in Canada and my life in particular. They showed me their artwork, they asked me to speak in French so they could hear how it sounded, and some asked for help with English. They shared their opinions about everything from the best music (Justin Bieber and Marshmellow, of course) to issues like gay rights. They wanted to know my thoughts and what these topics looked like in Canada. Little by little I really got to know the people who were lined up in perfect rows staring at me each time I entered their classroom; interactions were still appropriate, but the freedom allowed for a deeper, more personal connection, and I liked it.

At the same time, I got to know them, they really got to know me. I mean you really have no choice; they get straight to the point when they first meet you. Every first conversation began with the same

five questions: Where are you from? How old are you? Do you have kids? Are you married? Do you have a boyfriend? And boy oh boy did my answers to these questions puzzle their young minds. (I won't lie...even the adults were disconcerted at times.) By Nicaraguan standards, I was an enigma: unmarried, no children, in my thirties, single and travelling around the world. I was a direct contrast to a place where women usually have their first child before they are twenty. Furthermore, I chose pants over skirts, a make-up free face, no nail polish, and a ponytail as my hairdo everyday. They inquired on why I was like this, so I told them, I prefer to sleep then make myself up, and I like pants because they are easier to move in. I remember telling my friend there about these conversations and how suddenly I was questioning whether I was being a girl wrong – a question I'd never considered before. He replied that their observations and our conversations were a good thing because they were finally getting a different model of femininity and the girls could consider other avenues other than relationships and babies as the sole goal. I was like, whoah, no pressure. However, he was right. As I spoke to more and more of the girls at the school, I uncovered how many of them had hopes for careers, to travel, to study at university, as well as having families and children. Alternately, they asked to do my hair on numerous occasions (they really did a fantastic job), while my host family found events to take me to that required make-up, a dress, and heels. I will admit it, it was kind of fun. We talked about how hard it was to balance all of the competing ideas that we had for our lives as well as all the social pressures. Even though these were personal conversations, they did not undermine the respect they showed when I was teaching; in truth the freedom of all my interactions made me a stronger teacher because I knew what was on their minds and how to catch their interest. Unbeknownst to me, this relationship would become paramount with the arrival of another Canadian volunteer through a different organization.

Mason, the other volunteer, would arrive three months into my time in Managua. He was a university student studying Public Health. For his placement, the school requested the creation of a sexual health program given his studies as a way to address the high teen pregnancy rate (second behind Dominican Republic). Given his lack of pedagogical training, he asked if I could help turn his knowledge into creative workshops that would work with the students and if I would deliver the lessons with him, especially the workshop where the boys and girls would be separated. To discuss intimacy and sex with youth is always awkward, but with the relationship of trust that I had built, we were able to have some interesting conversations that I hope will empower the young ladies to feel like they can make wise decisions about their bodies. I hope that the conversations will ensure that the young men be more responsible and caring within their relationships with women. And lastly, because we discussed LGTBQ items, I hope that everyone is a little more informed and aware about gender and sexual identity – topics that are only now being spoken about more openly. Being a Catholic school, we were both impressed at the progressiveness of the school, and how supportive the local teachers were in the execution of the workshops.

Before this adventure into teaching health for the first time in my life, I was working with the English teachers in the school. It was an interesting dynamic because the morning teacher, Luis, was an experienced veteran of the profession and the afternoon teacher was Carolina, a new teacher in her first year at the school. Both were very talented in different ways. Luis was calm and wise. Carolina was creative and spunky. Both had really tough gigs trying to teach a second language without many

materials to help them other than a marker, a whiteboard, and a handful of textbooks that students shared in groups of 5 or 6. They were happy to have a native speaker to join them in the classroom because unfortunately, they were very reluctant to speak in English – a truth that means the students do not hear English in class. Other than the obvious lack of English, one of the main issues I found in lessons was that the activities were not super dynamic. Learning a second language is hard work; through observation, I noticed that the students were very quick to give up. I also recognized teachers were very quick to translate everything to Spanish rather than assist them at trying to figure it out for themselves. I do not judge the teachers. When you have a room full of 60 students give or take, and just yourself to help them all ... what can you really do? From my observations and conversations, I decided there were two aspects that needed to be address to the pedagogy going on in the classroom: motivation and timing. Class generally began with the students copying an exercise and being asked to complete the exercise. This is a valid instruction, but most of the time it was an activity that required only 15 minutes to complete dragged out over a 45 minute period. The students do copy it, but they do not attempt its completion. Instead, they begin doing each other's hair, taking selfies, chit chatting, dancing, painting their nails, and many other non-curricular actions. They knew they could do this because without fail in the last 10 minutes of class, the teacher would translate everything to Spanish and the students would copy the answers. They knew they did not have to do it. Why work if you don't have to? So, as my Spanish became increasingly stronger, I was able to start to create and lead more activities with the English teacher. I wanted to share something useful other than my wonderful pronunciation abilities. My friend had told me that more than anything, students in Nicaragua need to see learning is fun. At my school here, I have games a plenty for teaching French; therefore, I decided to try to adapt these activities to suit the environment there. It was not an easy task. Luckily, I had some money that my colleagues had given me to use to buy materials in the classroom – they know how difficult it is to teach without them. I brought in beach balls with basic questions on them to get them speaking. I had Easter eggs as well which I used to create a game to reinforce the unit on giving directions. Each egg contained instructions to the next spot on the map. In order to receive the next egg, they had to tell me their current position. The deviation from the norm, the colourfulness of the materials, and the short but accessible activities resulted in more buy in from the students. I finally felt like I was sharing the talents that I had originally envisioned sharing when I applied for the position. I felt victorious because the students were working and because the teachers asked to keep the games for the future. I also liked that they started to think outside the box as well. Through mutual smiles, kindness, energy and encouragement the teachers, the students, and me were able to share our knowledge, our skills, and our selves, which enriched our daily experiences at the school. We shared and learned together.

Outside the school, people continued to share with me; these relationships were equally, if not more important because they were integral to making me feel safe, healthy, and happy. My host family welcomed me into their home from the beginning, and, through lunches and dinners together each day, we would talk about everything; through this simple act of communion, they taught me their language – the most important skill I had to develop to truly be able to contribute in a meaningful way at the school. Through their kindness, they adopted me as one of their own – they have dubbed me their Nicaraguan daughter and sister. In addition, a friend from my previous trip to Nicaragua took me sightseeing around the country on weekends, as well as introduced me to his friends – some

of which became mine as well. I was able to have a social network in a new country with relative ease. Eventually, I became the person driving his mom, his sister, and his scout troop around when he was out of the country for work. All of these were the people who populated life outside of Los Quinchos; connections that kept homesickness at bay and who have enriched not only my time in Nicaragua, but are now a part of my daily life thanks to technology.

Now, before I leave you with my final thought, let's go back to the beginning of this journey. Before even having an interview at the United Church Head Office, I received a discernment booklet in the mail. The first page was a reflection activity on going through the journey of how I was "called" to this position. At the time, I felt like the word "calling" was a little too over the top. I was hesitant to use that verb because "called" to me seemed like something reserved for super special people. I am not superwoman or Rosa Parks or Mother Teresa. The way I looked at it, I just had always been interested in the world and had nagging desire to teach in other parts of it; I was a curious person who liked to travel and meet new people. That hardly seemed dignified to be called a "calling". What I realize now is that that deep-rooted desire was a calling; it did not have to be for doing something lofty like setting the oppressed free. I was merely someone who through the sum of all my previous experiences had something to offer and chose to offer it. Likewise, all of the people who I have mentioned and some that I have not – in particular my family here – also chose to offer themselves in whatever capacity they could in order to support me during the experience. I think we were all called. Most importantly, I think each person is called on a daily basis to emulate Jesus' love in opening ourselves to care enough to share. Every time we do this, we are the good news that he proclaims at the synagogue because we become the agents of compassion and justice positively affecting one another. As such, we have the power to bring about change and do good.