Background

Chacraseca is a rural and poor village in Western Nicaragua that has been overwhelmed by natural disasters. The population is roughly 8,600, and the community is divided into eleven sectors. A representative from each sector is elected to serve for two years in the governing committee called Acopades, an organized and dedicated group of leaders who are committed to their community, but lack access to resources that would enable them to enact their goals. Their mission is to work on social initiatives- improving farming, housing, potable water, health, road maintenance, and education.

Though many are eager to learn, only one third of the youth attend school in Chacraseca. There are 13 schools, and all are in need of repairs. Many don’t even have chairs. Teachers work with limited materials and many are volunteers from the community. Even though the schools are public, they receive very limited government funding, as Nicaragua is one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere. Teachers work with almost nonexistent resources, and many of them are un-trained volunteers from the community. Chacraseca is eager for education, but doesn’t have the resources to create an organized system. It relies on aid from the outside to make minor improvements, and we want to use this project to direct them towards self-sufficiency, rather than dependency.

Bard and Chacraseca

The Nicaragua Exchange, a Trustee Leader Scholar project at Bard College, has a long standing relationship of solidarity with Chacraseca. Since 2002, the Exchange has sponsored yearly student trips to Nicaragua where we have worked closely with Acopades to construct 18 houses, repair schools, and develop a potable water well. We have a highly developed relationship with this community. Elysia has been a participant for four years and director for three, and Chelsea a director for two years. Elysia is a Spanish and Latin American Studies major at Bard, Chelsea is a Human Rights major, and we are both committed to Chacraseca beyond our undergraduate experience. While in Chacraseca, Bard students live with local residents, and maintain friendships. We have brought the leader of Acopades to visit Bard on two occasions, and on a recent trip he was accompanied by a young woman for whom we provide a scholarship to attend the University of Leon in Nicaragua.

We have been recently working with the community to move the project toward education. The Exchange provides three university scholarships for Chacraseca students to attend Nicaraguan universities. We also provide support packages for young children to attend school which include pens and pencils, notebooks, a backpack, and a uniform. On our most recent trip to Chacraseca, we worked with a community student group to tutor English. We also taught guitar, which helped us teach English through music. In this tutoring we established a fun and trusting relationship between our group and the students.

We fundraise the money for all of these activities on our own, and have been able to make a real difference in the lives of many community members.

Project Objective

Our Davis Peace Project provides greater educational opportunities in Chacraseca, and is grounded in the notion that access to education supports empowerment, empowerment creates agency, agency drives self reliance, and self reliance is crucial to making viable community. We plan to open doors to education that will lead to sustainable results by providing future leaders with access to information, opportunities, and ideas. We are proposing the following three-part project that aims to significantly increase access to education, and will spend 6 weeks in Chacraseca this summer putting our goals to action.

1. **Sustainable Development of the School System:** Increase access to schools for children and teachers by providing supplies, internet access, repairs, and basic student materials. This aspect of the project in of itself will increase educational access profoundly. We will meet with Acopades regularly to discuss the most effective allocation of our funds towards teaching materials, scholarship packages, and school repairs.

2. **Local Sharing of Ideas:** Acopades has limited transportation, cell phone service, and Internet access, and is very interested in how issues such as health and education are dealt with in nearby communities. We
will travel with a group of Chacresecans – students and members of Acopades -- to small villages in the area. We will invite female students on this trip, in order to promote the advancement of women. We will hold meetings with other villages to discuss and share approaches to community development, invaluable knowledge for both Chacraseca and the other communities involved. These meetings will allow all involved to see the issues they face in a larger framework, which will help them all develop sustainable solutions. We will visit Los Leches, Aceba, and Miramar. At the end of the investigation process we will produce, with Acopades and the students, a resource book to be shared with all of these communities.

3. **Groundwork for Future Program**: This past year, we thought hard about how we, members of the Bard College community, can use our resources to best help with education in the future. We are considering a tutoring program in Chacraseca in which Bard students receive credit; an exchange in which students from Chacraseca come to Bard for leadership conferences; and /or a Chacrasecan student studying at Bard. We have discussed these options with Acopades and the faculty at Bard. This summer we will speak extensively with community members about our future ideas that use Bard’s institutional resources -- asking questions, creating contacts, and recording information. For example, what would be the procedures and application process for Chacrasecan students if they wanted to attend Bard? How could we ensure that recipients of our support continue working for their community? How can Bard and Bard students address the ongoing educational needs concerning health and sanitation, sexual education, mathematics, expressive arts? We believe it is essential that international groups should always be listening as much as they act, so they can understand how to be most effective. Understanding local politics and culture is crucial in international involvement. When we return to Bard we will share our experience with our peers, to generate discussion and thinking about the delicate balance between cultural sensitivity and international involvement. This communication will help us know how Bard can be most effectively involved with Chacraseca in the future.

**Long Term Objectives**

This project ensures the continuation of education in Chacraseca, and the promotion of agency for leaders, teachers, and students. Our project will ensure immediate access, and lay the groundwork for future problems that the community can address on its own to ensure sustainability. In conjunction with the community of Chacraseca we will:

- Lay the groundwork for a long term Bard-Chacraseca educational alliance.
- Empower young women to make community-wide decisions, especially those that concern education.
- Develop a plan for a workable school system (to overcome problems such as students of all ages being crammed into the same small classroom, lack of school lunches, long traveling distances to schools – solvable with knowledge of the bus system or funding a vehicle, and so on).
- Lobby the government to provide teachers, and encourage Acopades to help support them financially.
- Collect and donate computer equipment, and train people to use it—especially college students.
- Commit ourselves to raising stipends for small children so that they can attend school instead of working as children.
- Create a program to ensure that students will give back to their community after participating in Bard’s educational program.