Section I

The goal we set for our 6 week stay in Chacraseca this summer was to empower youth and community members by focusing on an educational initiative. The first two weeks of our stay were spent gathering information about both the education system in Chacraseca and the Nicaraguan public system as a whole. From our initial two weeks of research we were struck by the fact that, while national poets such as Ruben Dario are highly regarded, a culture of reading was generally nonexistent in schools and homes. In response, we focused our Davis Project for Peace on the organization of a community library as an empowering tool for sustainability, using the slogan “leer es poder.” We also organized two trips to Nicaraguan cities so that young student leaders could have the opportunity to see and be inspired by their own country, giving them the resources to invent solutions to similar problems in their own community, rather than to rely on foreign aid and ideas.

During our initial stage of research, we met with government employed and volunteer teachers in Chacraseca, administration, faculty, students and parents, and conducted interviews and initiated informal conversations. We toured every 2-6 classroom school-house in the wide and rural community of Chacraseca, observing classes and recording our findings. We also received a tour of a city school in Leon which helped us understand the distinct differences in education between urban and rural settings in Nicaragua. Additionally we toured the American Nicaraguan University, a private school in the capital city Managua. Comparing the different schools in regard to location, resources, funding, and teacher training, helped us to better troubleshoot problems in education specific to Chacraseca.

After deciding upon the library project, we held several meetings about importance of a community library and the effect it would have on the youth. We met with Acopades (the governing committee of Chacraseca), teachers, contractors, the administration, our host family, students and their parents. We found it vital to get as many people involved in the project as possible so it would be a true community effort and run as smoothly as possible after we left. We teamed up with a peace corps volunteer and a local Nicaraguan NGO, CHICA, to provide trainings on book codification and library organization using the Dewy Decimal System. Young female students, teachers, and mothers of students participated in the training, which gave them the credentials to work in a professional library in a city. Parents and students participated in the construction of the library, and the administration and faculty were actively involved voicing their opinions and concerns and helping us coordinate student participation. Throughout the meetings, we encountered people who were highly supportive and participatory, while at other times we witnessed a major lack of motivation. It was an incredible experience learning how to speak across culture. The most influential thing we said when we explained our intention was, “this is not our library, this is your library.” This statement spoke to people and effectively communicated the point that this project was not about us. It was about their community and their children. Getting the various groups of people we worked with on the same page was a great challenge, but one that paid off and made our project strong and unique. We found ourselves in the middle of varying opinions, and had to learn how to problem solve, negotiate and eventually embrace and own our role.

We worked as hard as we could to accomplish our goals. Our only regret is that the library was not finished on time because the contractors moved slower than expected. Ideally, we would have liked another week so we could see it running and work out the kinks, but we finished the building and the book codifications which was a grand triumph in of itself. We are in communication with the Peace Corps volunteer who gives us updates and with Acopades as well. In January we will continue our work on the library, providing and organizing anything it might need. We also strengthened our relationship
and communication skills with Acopades tremendously. We truly feel like we made a break-through in communicating and working together, across culture and across gender.

In addition to spending the last 4 weeks on the library, we took seven students on two separate trips to two interesting cities in Nicaragua, Esteli and Matagalpa. We invited students who over the first 3 weeks demonstrated leadership skills and dedicated interests in improving their community, the majority female. In Matagalpa, we visited a self-initiated women’s textile cooperative called Cooperativa el Chile, a coffee plantation cooperative, and explored the city which reflected a sense of revolutionary and artistic influence that our Chacrasecan student companions had yet to witness in Nicaragua. In Esteli, we visited a cigar factory and tobacco warehouse, an artisans women’s cooperative in Condega called Ducuale Grande, a nature reserve whose residents emphasized sustainable living, and the downtown city that was home to industrious Nicaragua. At the end of the trip we had meetings about what we all learned and how the trip contributed to the way we saw Nicaragua.

On this trip, we found it difficult to find a balance between friendship and leadership with the students. It was a delicate situation because they had never traveled in such a way, so we wanted them to feel comfortable in an unfamiliar situation, but in doing this we were less disciplined and structured in our leadership. For example, we realized we could have initiated more frequent and formal group discussions about the activities and the trip in general, but at the same time wanted them to be able to enjoy themselves and not feel like we were hounding them. Despite this, it was heartwarming and thrilling to see students pulling out notebooks and asking questions without our prompting. These students thanked us profusely and continued to tell us how beautiful the trips were.

Because of our experience this summer, we were not only able to accomplish these specific projects, but we came away with information that we used to create the most effective plan for empowerment to use for our 3 week stay in January. We believe that the most effective way Bard can participate in Chacraseca is to provide teacher trainings. Because most teachers in the community are volunteers or poorly trained, the workshop will focus on teaching strategies, creating inspiring classroom environments, and making use of limited teaching materials. Without the research and relationship strengthening we did this summer we would not have the confidence or the grounding to initiate such a project. We will also continue to work on encouraging community use of the library by promoting books and the act of reading and we’ll also paint a mural on the outside with local students!

Section II

Peace is something that one can carry within while living in a world where peace isn’t always visible. It is the patience and understanding that once must hold on to while living in an imperfect world. This feeling of peace can guide one in his or her desire to improve the world, lending him or her strength when things might seem too difficult or discouraging to even make a difference. Those who are most cautious and sensitive about the effect they are having on others may feel an imbalance of this inner peace when trying to negotiate a difficulty. In the organization of the library and the student trips we had to mediate between many people and balance varying opinions. It was a process, and very difficult at times, but also the most valuable part of our trip. To us, understanding, communication, and collaboration is peace. We didn’t want to make decisions for the people of Chacraseca. Rather, we listened to them, we observed, we considered the history and development of the community, and we sought to promote ideas that would give them confidence to enact change in their own environment. During our summer trip, we learned how to work cross-culture, how to negotiate difficult situations, and the importance of maintaining inner peace and confidence in oneself—that with this, if one wants to create change it is possible to work with others to make it reality.

“I’m truly proud of what we accomplished in Nicaragua. In a way, I have never been more proud of any experience I’ve had. Not because we built the library or organized trips, but because we held true to our original belief of listening and empowerment throughout. Whenever we ran into a problem, Elysia and I came together to talk it through, taking notes, reflecting, letting it settle with time and a night’s sleep, and always reminding each other of our original intent and then viewing the problem through that lens. To me, this is a really beautiful thing.” -Chelsea Whealdon
Us traveling with the group of student leaders

Us working with some teachers and administration on the library

Us with students, two of the CHICA NGO members, and the two contractors