JOURNAL ENTRIES

Why am I going on this trip?

This trip is a great opportunity to my lifelong mission of being a “man for others.” It is my belief that I have been given many gifts so that I could use them to help other people. My primary focus on this trip is to help the Nicaraguans.

I also decided to pursue this trip to get a better understanding and exposure to a different culture outside of Cincinnati. I want to learn what a typical day is like in the life of a Nicaraguan and what their values, culture, and lifestyles consist of. I take things for granted very often in Cincinnati, which is why I think it is very important to experience a trip like this and get thrown out of my comfort zone.

Sunday March 17

Before we left for this trip, many people told us that the key to having a great time is by being FLEXIBLE. This skill was needed before we even checked out of the airport in Managua, Nicaragua. All of our luggage was left in Miami, Florida, not transferred from plane to plane, and so we arrived today with no change of clothes, shoes, socks, gloves, snacks, etc… My initial anxiety over this dilemma faded quickly though when the man at the airport—José—said he would find it and ship it to our compound by tomorrow night. Apparently, they lose luggage all the time. Maggie, one of our mission leaders, says she always carries all of her luggage on the plane with her to avoid this problem.

Nicaragua, just from my views over the two-hour bus ride from the airport to our compound, is astoundingly different than the United States. The temperature is consistently 90-100 degrees and sunny, but drops down to about 70 degrees at night. It has not rained here since the middle of October according to Maggie. The country has a dry season that lasts from October through April and a wet and rainy season from May through September. All of the houses here are small cement, wooden, or tin shacks and huts and hardly any of them were larger than the size of my kitchen at home. The streets are chaotic—crazy drivers and people honking in the city. Nicaraguans are all over the place outside. In fact, on our ride back from the airport, two young boys ran into the street and started cleaning our windshield, even as out driver waved and honked at them to leave! It is very different than the poor people we see on the streets of Cincinnati. We also saw lots of cows, horses, chickens, and dogs on the loose on the way here. The landscape in Nicaragua, however, is amazing. Tropical trees everywhere you look and beautiful volcanoes and mountains in every background. We stopped briefly on a beach today on the way to the compound (at Lake Managua), and the view was absolutely beautiful.

The facility here at Amigos for Christ is a lot less nice than I was expecting, but by comparison to the neighboring areas, it is luxurious. We have dorm-style bedrooms, a cafeteria, the roncho, the roof, and bathrooms with modern toilets, showers, and running water. The roncho, which is a large gazebo-like structure in the center of the compound, is really neat. This is where we will gather each night after our day. At nighttime, it feels perfect here. We all sat on the roof, gazing up at the stars, and simply talked about a variety of topics all night. The only thing I would like to change about this compound—the cold showers!

Monday March 18

Today we visited the community of Miguel Cristiano. The bus ride from Amigos for Christ to Miguel Cristiano was two hours long and this village was out in the middle of the mountains. To enter the community, we had to cross a river. Today the river was almost completely dried up because it hasn’t rained in Nicaragua since October. But during the rainy season, the river approaches 15-20 feet deep water. Therefore, this community is completely stranded and isolated from the rest of the world for a large portion of the year. Today they were in the process of constructing a foot-bridge across the river, the materials and resources of which took over 40 years for this community to get.

I think my biggest shock today was understanding how the people here can survive way out in the middle of nowhere, miles and miles away from any modern, industrialized society. The community lived in extreme poverty, but yet all of them were in a good mood today and joined us in our work.

We spend the day digging trenches to lay water pipes in. There is only one well in Miguel Cristiano and it is located at the end of the community. Therefore, the majority of the community has to walk a long way (about 1.5 miles for some) to get clean, fresh water every day. Our mission is to lay down pipes that will connect the water source to a faucet or spicket at the other end of the community, providing fresh water to everyone. This project is expected to eventually provide each home with 100 gallons of water per day for only five dollars each month. It is EXTREMELY important to them and will change their lives completely. All of the male Nicaraguans and even some females were working alongside us in the ditches all day, most of them working a lot harder than we were.

I met many local people in the community. Alia and his son Jordia talked to us when we took a break from digging. I talked to Carlitas and Ferra, two adorable, cute little girls who came out to see what was going on. They were so sweet and innocent, and a little timid but excited at the same time. Along with a couple others, perhaps the coolest person I met today was Rudy. He is 18 years old and lives in a house down the street from the Amigos for Christ facility. He ate breakfast and lunch with us and came out all day to work on the trenches. It was cool to see his work ethic after he was fed by Amigos. He volunteered his time to help other people, working hard all day and not knowing anybody, simply to provide himself two meals for the day. I sat with him on the two-hour bus ride back and got to know a little bit. It was the longest conversation I have ever had with a Spanish-only speaking person. I talked to him for a good hour and half using my high school Spanish skills and learned a lot about him. We are very similar!

Tuesday March 19

Today we visited another community that needed fresh water—Mino de Agua—and began digging trenches again. The coolest part about today was the people we met. Before we arrived at Mino de Agua, we stopped at a house Amigos has built for a family last year. This top-notch house had a main living room, a kitchen with a tile countertop, and a fireplace with a chimney to cook from. Perhaps the most impressive part of the house was the modern bathroom, which had a flush toilet and shower faucet. The family was SO happy to see us. Kati, the young woman whose house it was, and her darling mother were there with us. Kati was a cute young woman with two kids of her own. She was smiling the entire time. Her mother greeted us all with warm hugs, showing us that they were truly so appreciative of what Amigos had provided for them last year.

My favorite part of the day was visiting the family living in Mino de Agua though. There were multiple families living in one house, and there had to be at least ten kids running around. Towards the end of the day, I got to hang out and play with one of the six-year-old boys whose name was Jonatin. We played in the dirt and made small towers out of sticks. He was very playful and happy to be there with me. It was touching and humbling to see the smile on his face when we would complete one of the four or five stick towers, and the smile on his sister Grita’s face when I lifted Jonatin onto my shoulders. All of the kids today were so playful and just wanted to have fun and love each other.

Back at their house, the grandmother has picked and cleaned fresh mangos for all of us. What a kind thing to do, I thought: give us their own food, even when it is clear that they need the food WAY more than we did. This was such a LOVING family and I think that these are the kind of people that deserve our love the most. In the very little that they have, also out in the mountains of Nicaragua, they have some of the strongest love I have ever seen. Their spirits and smiles motivated me to finish digging at the end of the day to provide clean water for them.

The theme this week is perseverance (chosen to focus on by the team at Amigos for Christ). I hope that I can look back at these experiences at times when I need to persevere in my life. The community of people in Mino de Agua showed great inspiration to me and exhibited perseverance to the highest degree possible today.

Wednesday March 20

Today we took a break from working and went to an old folk’s home, downtown Chinandega, and the beach. I can honestly say that all three of these destinations were a blast and that today was the most fun I have had so far on the trip.

At the old folk’s home, we visited a bunch of older men and women and spent time talking and being with them. First we gathered them together and had mass together in the “iglesia.” I wheeled a small, smart woman named Angelina into the iglesia (church) and we talked for a while before the mass actually began. She was such a sweet lady and had a very genuine interest in me. She was super happy when I sat down with her and held her hand at mass. For as old as she was, I was fairly surprised at how “with it” she was, talking about her story in Nicaragua and how she finally ended up there in the old folk’s home.

After mass, the entire group gathered to dance. One woman, Rosa, was by FAR the best dancer. This cute older lady would shake her booty and show off her moves to all of the boys. I sat down to talk to her for a while, too, and she must have given me twenty kisses on the cheek in a row while embracing me in a warm hug before we left.

This community today was more loving than ever. They entertained us by dancing to traditional Mexican dancing songs, and we entertained them at the end by showing our “Gangnam Style” moves. One of the older women gave us strange look as if we were a bunch of crazy weirdos. It was certainly an excellent morning.

After we left, we ate lunch a nearby new mall, and then travelled via bus to downtown Chinandega to explore the marketplace. It was CRAZY! The marketplace was chaotic, busy, colorful, friendly, welcoming, and different than anywhere I’d ever been before. Shops were lined up all next to each other along both sides of the streets, with Nicaraguans selling authentic clothes, bags, small souvenirs, shoes, and lots of tropical fruit. My favorite fruit was something called a “jacote.” It was shaped like a very large grape, with a soft, yellow fruit inside, and a seed in the middle. We talked to random Nicaraguans all over the marketplace and everyone was extremely friendly and welcoming. The 17-year-old girl selling backpacks, the police officer who accepted a mango slice from me, the firefighters who showed us their trucks, the taxi driver who stopped to talk to Nick and me, and the girls helping us in the souvenir store were all smiling and shining examples of being welcomed into their city. I will also always remember the streets—cars, bicycles, motorcycles, trucks, and biciclantes—all packed into one lane about eight feet wide, vehicles driving alongside people and shops, inches from knocking over shelves, stands, and street-side booths.

We finished the day off at the beautiful beach along the Pacific coastline. The beach was gorgeous—the tree shelters near the edge of the sand and the two hundred yards of shallow water you could walk out into before getting swallowed by the waves. Apparently, the waves in Nicaragua are some of the biggest in the world, and surfers travel to the country for the primary purpose of surfing on these waves. We stayed at the beach to watch the sunset and then travelled back to Amigos for Christ.

Our team of eight UC students has a come a very long way in such a short time period. By now, you’d think we’d have known each other long before this trip because we’ve been bonding so well and enjoying our time with each other. Last night, making fun of each other after dinner, and today, bonding at the beach in the waves and building the pyramid, we have become extraordinarily close friends. As a trip leader, it is great for me to see that our entire team is having a good time.

I feel like not all mission trips are at all similar to this one. Amigos for Christ is an amazing group of people and they have made these three and a half days awesome for us. I wish I could stay here in Nicaragua for the entire month to learn more Spanish and meet more people.

Thursday March 21

This has been, yet again, another GREAT day on the trip. We returned to Miguel Cristiano to continue digging trenches and being with the community. During the lunch break, I talked to many Nicaraguans and played a game of gigantes y enanos (giants and dwarfs) with an 11-year-old boy named Arial. He was so happy and excited to play games with us. He also got to use Brandie’s camera to snap a couple photos of unexpecting people around the room! We really enjoyed our time together.

Again, everyone in the community today was so welcoming, especially a demonstrated by their mass.

After a long day’s work, we broke early to celebrate mass together. Father Kevin, a priest who came with us from GA Tech, said the mass. (Fr. Kevin, by the way, was an awesome dude. Young, hard-core military figure, very friendly attitude, and a real passion for people and service. ) We all kind of filed into the mass randomly while the Nicaraguans were singing to the music, but soon after, the community leader came into the church and started waving for all of us (Americans) to exit the church. Confused, we exited the church and waited a couple houses away for something to happen next. Soon after, Fr. Kevin came out in his purple priest attire, looking like a king, and began to lead us into the church. The community leader has brought us back outside because he wanted Fr. Kevin to lead us in! Before we entered the church though, the Nicaraguans has a fireworks show for us! They sent dozens of firecrackers into the air in celebration that we were there with them. Men, women, their children, and grandparents, all welcomed us with handshakes, hugs, and smiles as we proceeded into their church. It was a sweet moment for all of to be a part of. After singing and cheering, the mass began with the Nicaraguans sitting around with us. You could see how grateful they felt that we were helping them with their water system this week.

Father Kevin gave a homily focusing on the symbolism of water. He talked about how we were working together to bring water to the community this week, just as Jesus uses water in his teachings to symbolize new hope, faith, and salvation. It was a really neat comparison.

 I’ve always cherished distinct moments in life that may clearly be a sign of God’s love in action, not just coincidences, and one of those moments occurred after the mass. After we left the church, storm clouds hovered over the community, the temperature dropped significantly, and despite the Amigos team’s comments that it would not rain, it started raining in Miguel Cristiano for the first time since October! This phenomenon was almost unheard of, and the Nicaraguans all had their buckets out, everyone outside smiling because it was raining. This rain came right after we had celebrated mass together and focused our thoughts on the use of water in our lives. I took it as a sign that He was looking over us today with a smile on His face.

Our the end of the day, our UC group got together to reflect on the trip, and we had a very meaningful conversation. We discussed highs and lows of the trip as well as the people in Nicaragua, their faith, and their lifestyles.

This week has taught me so much. The Nicaraguans are very different than the Americans. They are all so genuine, welcoming, and above all, LOVING. I’ve never been in communities like these where people you’ve never met before open up their homes to you, let you hold their children, and offer you home-cooked food (which they need more than we do), hug and kiss you relentlessly, and share conversations and laughs with each other even when you didn’t understand what they said. The Nicaraguan culture is true, sincere, and valuable. The people here have basically nothing to their names besides their friends and families, but that is all they need to achieve complete happiness. Their faith in God is unwavering and strength and courage is so enviable to me. It makes me sad to think that I am returning to the US in only two days. I am certain that I want to go on another mission trip soon because this week has been so remarkable and unforgettable.

The practice of Catholicism here has been cool to see. Despite the upbeat music and celebratory styles and people here, they practice their faith the same way we do. It is cool to know that I believe in and practice a religion that is the same as the Nicaraguan’s down here. My beliefs and practices have been affirmed down here in Nicaragua.

Padre Nuestro, que estas en el cielo, santificado sea tu nombre. Venga a nosotros su reino, y agase tu voluntad en la tierra come en el cielo. Damos hoy nuestro pan de cada dia, perdona nuestras ofensas, y como tambien nosotros perdonamos a los que nos ofenden. No nos dejes caer en la tentacion, libramos del mal, Amen.

Friday March 22

Today we finished out work at Miguel Cristiano and dedicated most of the day to spending time with the community there. We ate lunch together (bean soup with aguape cheese) in their house and played a big game of soccer to end the day. The children of Miguel Cristiano made today unforgettable. Arial, Carlos, Daniel, Manuel, and the countless other little kids had so much fun with us.

Kelsey said something to me last night that really resonated with me in that we are helping an entire COMMUNITY of people down here. The impact we are making is huge and sometimes hard to realize, but it is very real. This experience has undoubtedly changed me for the better by giving me a greater appreciation of the love and sense of community that humans can share with one another.

Right before we left Miguel Cristiano today, I was playing Frisbee with a 6-year-old boy named Manuel. His smile made my day.

I will miss everyone down here, especially Rudy. Talk about a great kid. Hopefully we can keep in touch via Facebook, and maybe I’ll see him again someday when I return. It was cool to see how we introduced ourselves on the first day, and today he embraced me and called me his hermano, brother, as we pushed each other out of the way to kick a soccer ball, laughing and even making fun of each other. I will surely miss him and the lessons he taught me.

AMDG

*These journal entries were slightly modified from the actual journal I kept on the trip. Personal thoughts and feelings are left out of this document for obvious reasons.*