

# NEWSLETTER

# FRIENDS OF BATAHOLA

TOMORROW IS A NEW DAWN

SPRING, 2006

## MISSION STATEMENT OF THE FRIENDS OF BATAHOLA

Inspired by the vision of Sister Margie Navarro, CSJ and Father Angel Torrellas, OP to empower the Nicaraguan people, and in unity with the people of the Cultural Center of Batahola Norte, the Friends of Batahola strive to answer the Gospel call by affirming and supporting their mission. We share who we are and what we have through friendship, prayer, solidarity and financial support.

### CULTURAL CENTER CHOIR JOINS IN CELEBRATING THE CASA MATERNA

The "Casa Materna-Mary Ann Jackman" is located in the town of Matagalpa, two hours North of Managua. On March 15th it celebrated 15 years service to poor women from rural areas. It is a welcoming home where pregnant women come to stay for several days prior to delivery, and where, after the infant's birth, they can recuperate, learn parenting skills, be nourished and readied for the trip back home. It is not a hospital, but rather the Casa provides transport to and from the local hospital. The Casa has assisted over ten thousand women, most with high-risk



pregnancies....certainly reason to celebrate! The Cultural Center of Batahola choir, "Angel Torrellas" was invited to perform at this simple ceremony on March 15th. They sang a variety of selections which included the National Anthem, Mozart's ABCD and everyone's favorite, "Nicaragua Nicaraguita". Kitty Madden, a native of Michigan who has been associated with the Casa from its beginnings, welcomed the choir and told them "We are grateful for the great joy you brought us at our 15th anniversary celebration. We cannot express enough how thankful we are!" Interested readers may find out more about the mission of the Casa Materna at the website: [comnet.org/casamaterna](http://comnet.org/casamaterna)

### THEATRE PROJECT... PROMOTE HUMAN RIGHTS

The Batahola Cultural Center was pleased to announce that it has been the recipient of a \$5000. grant from the United Nations Development Programme for a theatre project whose purpose is to promote human rights in Nicaragua.

Francisco Gutierrez, a member of the Administrative Team of the Center, himself a lawyer, assisted in writing the grant proposal.

Francisco notes: "People here just do not know their rights."

He adds that if there is to be any hope of improving human rights in Nicaragua, the average person must learn what those rights are. Objectives of the project include the following:

- Produce high quality materials to aid in teaching human rights.
- Equip teachers, in both a formal and informal manner, to assist in spreading the message on human rights.
- Develop a drama course in which the students will be asked to write a script on a theme such as: human dignity, tolerance, equality of the sexes, a culture of peace and other social justice issues. The piece of the project, including classes and performances, will take place between May and November of this year.



### BREAKING STEREOTYPES

So what is it like to be the lone male in Saturday morning cooking class? "Tranquilo" answers Luis Carranza, which means, "No problem". And for Eric Quillen, who is in the sewing class, a similar response. Eric, a 15 year old who became interested in taking the cooking class about a year ago, credits his interest in this class to his grandmother. He is currently the only male enrolled in cooking, but he gets along great with the women and they all have the utmost respect for each other. Eric says that he can laugh with the women in his sewing class: he has



always enjoyed this type of activity though not, at this time, planning to make a career of it. He is not, however, opposed to turning his love of sewing into a form of additional income. Along with Luis and Erik, there are three other men enrolled in traditionally women-filled classes including handicrafts and cosmetology. It is wonderful to see these fellows taking the lead in breaking down stereotypes.

**ACTIVITIES BEYOND THE WALLS OF THE CENTER**

In addition to the Center’s educational and cultural activities at our own facilities, we were also active supporting organizations and groups beyond our walls:

- The struggle of the *campesino banana workers* was very present for many people throughout the year. These men and women have been fighting for years to win compensation from the Nicaraguan government and from the multi-national corporations, for the death and physical damage they have suffered after being exposed for years to pesticides that were banned internationally in 1973. In 2005 for the second year in a row, hundreds of the “Nemagon survivors” have walked from Chinandega in the north of Nicaragua to establish a tent city in Managua in front of the National Assembly. They are very poor and many are very sick because of their long-term exposure to the pesticides. The Center supported this struggle for justice by donating basic food staples (rice, sugar, coffee, beans, hygiene products) and clothing to the group. A special Mass was held and buses were provided so that members of the group could worship at the Center. Finally, the Chorus and Dance Group held a special concert with the Nemagon survivors at their tent city. This was a very moving experience, which ended with a fabulous display of marimba technique by a master marimba player in the Nemagon group.
- The Center also shared the bounty of donations, received from international supporters, with other institutions serving people in need. Clothes and toys were brought to children at the Velez Paiz Maternal-Infant Hospital and warm clothing to the expectant mothers at Casa Materna in Matagalpa. The Library donated over 300 books to public libraries in Batahola Sur and Ciudad Sandino.
- In both 2005 and 2006, the Center helped connect people in need with a donation of new wheelchairs organized by the volunteer medical clinic, a connection facilitated by our friends at Connecticut Quest for Peace.
- Throughout the year Center staff members were conscious of the different social struggles in which Nicaraguan society is engaged. Two issues that are of particular concern are the rising energy costs that hit poor families hardest and the *threat of water privatization that would do to water costs what energy privatization has done to electricity*. On several occasions we participated as a group in demonstrations against the harmful effects of these policies, and we continue to look for ways to effectively fight for justice in these areas.
- The Center also supported Mary Aileen Dame and the Perez family in their quest to seek medical care in the United States for young Gabriel. Miladis Salazar was the principal intermediary between Mary Aileen and the family, coordinating financial and food support and getting necessary medical history and travel documents for Gabriel and his mother.



**FROM ANNUAL REPORT OF CULTURAL CENTER ACTIVITIES**

**VISITORS AND VOLUNTEERS 2005-2006**

| <u>BASIC EDUCATION FOR ADULTS</u> |                 | <u>VOCATIONAL TRAINING</u> |                 |
|-----------------------------------|-----------------|----------------------------|-----------------|
| <u>LEVEL</u>                      | <u>STUDENTS</u> | <u>COURSE</u>              | <u>STUDENTS</u> |
| BASIC LITERACY.....               | 7               | CASHIER TECH. ....         | 32              |
| LEVEL I .....                     | 11              | COMPUTING.....             | 47              |
| LEVELII .....                     | 19              | ACCOUNTING.....            | 15              |
| LEVEL III .....                   | 33              | TYPING.....                | 19              |
| <b>TOTAL.....</b>                 | <b>70</b>       | <b>TOTAL.....</b>          | <b>113</b>      |

  

| <u>WOMEN'S EMPOWERMENT AND TECHNICAL DOMESTIC TRAINING</u> |                 | <u>FINE ARTS</u>      |                 |
|--|-----------------|-----------------------|-----------------|
| <u>COURSE</u>  | <u>STUDENTS</u> | <u>COURSE</u>         | <u>STUDENTS</u> |
| BEAUTYCARE.....  | 70              | MUSIC.....            | 68              |
| COOKING.....   | 57              | DANCE.....            |                 |
| .. 84  |                 | THEATER.....          |                 |
| SEWING AND TAILORING.....                                  | 52              | 31. DRAWING/PAINT-    |                 |
| .. 27  |                 | 24. MUSIC II .....    |                 |
| HANDICRAFTS.....   |                 | 31. GUITAR.....       | 31              |
| ING.....   | 114             | DANCE FOR ADULTS..... | 26              |
| NATURAL MEDICINE.....                                      |                 | <b>TOTAL.....</b>     | <b>371</b>      |
| .....21  |                 |                       |                 |
| CAKE DECORATION .....                                      | 13              |                       |                 |
| ADVANCED CAKE DECORATION.....                              | 9               |                       |                 |
| <b>TOTAL.....</b>  | <b>256</b>      |                       |                 |

**GRAND TOTAL 810**

2005 was a very busy year for the Center in terms of visitors and volunteers. In total, the Center hosted 3 delegations of friends from the United States: Friends of Batahola board members in March, Sister Helen Prejean and friends in April, and the Immaculate Heart of Mary delegation in June. Six individual visitors came and stayed for periods ranging from 2 weeks to 1 year.

Failie Ritchie, Presbyterian minister from Canada. Her work focused on spiritual accompaniment for women in Batahola.

Patricia and Leyla Dervish, mother and daughter who stayed for two weeks to help in the library with story time and crafts.

Laura Neeland, a music student from Canada stayed for 2.5 months and was a great support to the chorus.

Carl Bailey, and investment fund manager, came for two weeks when he led workshops for staff and students on basic budgeting and money management.

John Neiswander, Mennonite Committee is currently completing a full year with the Center. He has assisted in the cultural and artistic promotion and well as in the new “Project Education” developed by Immaculate Heart of Mary Parish.

Joan Farre, from Spain, who, while working at the nearby Hermann Gmeiner School, came to the Center to participate in the chorus.

There were also many spontaneous visits throughout the year, from different organizations who brought their delegations to see the Center, as well as people who come to participate in Sunday Liturgy or cultural programs.

Out of the 810 registered students, 583 are women and 227 are men; 72% of the beneficia-

Batahola Sur and Ciudad Salumbo.  
people in need with a donation of new wheelchairs organized by the volunteer medical clinic, a contest for Peace.

### CHILDCARE SERVICES

In February this year, the Center began offering childcare services to its students in an effort to decrease the barriers which sometimes keep mothers from being able to attend classes. Too often mothers are forced to drop out of class for the simple reason of not having someone to care for their young children. But with the help of some "scholarship students" (those completing their social service requirements), this is no longer an obstacle. Gretchen Martinez, coordinator



of the program, tells us that there are currently seven students participating in childcare services and that approximately fifteen youngsters are cared for each week. The students entertain the children by helping them with homework, playing games, reading, or taking them to the library. Gretchen points out that the mothers have expressed appreciation for this childcare option which allows them to study without the distraction of caring for their children or missing class to care for them.

### ANNIVERSARY OF THE LIBRARY

On April 23rd, the library celebrated its anniversary. S. Margarita's dream of a library to service the extended Batahola community began construction in 1996. With the help of many generous donations of time, money and books, the Library is now a two-story structure holding over 5000 books, and serves thousands of persons from the community every year. To celebrate the anniversary, a luncheon was held for the scholarship students who fulfill their social service requirement by working in the library, and for the administrative staff. To involve the general public, the library held a three day exposition of books to demonstrate the variety of materials available. Along with books, photos were on display showing the library during its various stages of construction as well as some pictures of past events which had been held there. Under the direction of Arlen Lopez, the current head librarian, and with the continued support of the Batahola community, it is hoped that the library would continue to grow and find new ways to further serve the children and youth of surrounding neighborhoods.

### REVOLVING FUND FOR CENTER

Many years ago, when a teacher or worker at the Center had a pressing need for money, they would approach Sister Margarita or Father Angel and ask for a small loan. Sometimes it was for an unexpected medical expense, or the need to replace a door or window at home. After Margie and Angel died, the staff of the Center recognized the need to continue this type of assistance. With the help of a generous donation of \$2000. from Sister Maggie Fisher, the revolving fund was again initiated in 2002.



**How it works:** If someone requests assistance from the fund, they must meet with two designated staff members and the Center coordinator, who collectively decide if the request meets loan criteria. One of the main goals of the program is to help staff members remain in solidarity with one another, providing assistance to the person who had the most pressing need. For example, someone may have been waiting over a year for a loan to put an addition on to their home, but if another person comes with a child who has unexpectedly become ill and money is needed for the hospital or medicine, the assistance would go to the latter petitioner. According to Ingrid Perez, receptionist and current member of the fund committee, in the four years since it started, the Revolving Fund has provided more than 30 loans at a yearly interest rate of just 2%. The Fund is one more way that the Cultural Center fulfills its mission of empowering others and providing the means to overcome the terrible cycle of poverty in Nicaragua.

### STORY TIME FOR THE CHILDREN

On March 18th the library staff began its yearly project aimed at promoting creativity and imagination in the children of Batahola. The program takes place each Saturday morning and provides space whereby "children can be children" while learning the importance of reading, creativity and using their imagination. The program began in 1998 and is open to all children of Batahola. Activities include: story telling (conducted by the scholarship students who are performing



their social service); reading favorite stories and various arts and crafts.

The coordinator of these children, Arlen Lopez, commented that many of these children never get a chance to be just "kids"; often at home they must work to help their parents earn money for the family to survive.

During the two hours at the Center, they are taught the importance of books, reading, and creativity. About 20-30 children attend each session.

In addition to Saturday mornings, preschool to 3rd graders from the nearby Carlos Fonseca School come for a similar program of story telling, singing and games. These classes are typically quite large, often more than 40 children per class. Gretchen Martinez, Coordinator of the Scholarship Program has said: "While the children can be a handful at times, it's well worth it, seeing the kids discover that learning can be fun."

### HOLY WEEK SERVICES

After practicing through most of February and April, the choir and orchestra performed more than 30 pieces, many unique to the Holy Week services. Works of Handel, Mozart and Nicaragua's own Carlos Mejia Godart were included. Francisco Gutierrez, Coordinator of Artistic Promotion, stated that "Our Semana Santa services went very, very well". All were quite proud of what the choir and orchestra were able to accomplish. This year there was major participation of very young musicians, which showed a renewed commitment of these youths to the Center and to their peers.

For donations to the work of the Center:

The Friends of Batahola  
P.O. Box 15204  
Baton Rouge, LA 70895-5204

For information in the U.S., contact:

Mary Aileen Dame, MD  
damsels2@aol.com  
781-391-0230

In Nicaragua contact:

Jennifer Marshall  
batahola@ibw.com.ni



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**Melba Herrera Vallejos**

By Jonathan

At age 63, Melba Herrera has the same energy and spirit as her fellow students in Music and Art class, most of whom haven't yet graduated from High School. Melba first came to the Center back in 1994 looking to take an art class. Not only did she take an art class but also chose to enroll in Father Angel's music/recorder class as well as the Natural Medicine class. After taking four years of painting with Professor Gerardo she took a break from the Center, spending three years teaching recorder outside the Center. Then in 2005 Melba decided to return to Batahola to retake the Natural Medicine class. She mentions a very noticeable difference between the Natural Medicine class of 1994 and the one of today. 'The classes have gotten better, the instruction stronger, along with new advances and discoveries in the field of Natural Medicine.' In February of this year Melba decided to once again enter Gerardo's painting class. She says Gerardo is now a "professional" with a thorough understanding of painting and just a great overall teacher. Some of the things she mentions that make the Center stand out above other similar learning centers include it's focus on helping the poor while being open to everyone, offering it's services and classes to people from every economic and social class. Melba calls the Center a 'pioneer' in helping the poor, not only helping economically but also in raising self-esteem and people's self-worth, as well as leading the way in cultural, spiritual and economic development.

**BRIEF HISTORY OF THE CULTURAL CENTER OF BATAHOLA**

The Cultural Center of Batahola began in 1983 with the arrival of Sister Margarita Navarro of Cincinnati, Ohio and Father Angel Torrellas of Spain. Originally there was a one room prefab structure with a woman volunteering sewing classes as Father formed the children into a little choir. The Center, through some twenty-two years, has grown into a true oasis in a community which knows great poverty. Thousand of lives have been enhanced though the career preparatory courses offered at the Center, as well as through financial assistance given to students to attend primary, secondary, and university classes in the city. Courses offered at the Center are registered with the Ministry of Education so that diplomas have National recognition. Students who have benefitted are counted among the teachers, homemakers, lawyers and doctors of Nicaragua.

