

# NEWSLETTER

## FRIENDS OF BATAHOLA

TOMORROW IS A NEW DAWN

SUMMER-FALL, 2005

### UPDATE ON CENTER ACTIVITIES FROM JENNIFER MARSHALL, COORDINATOR

#### NEW COURSE: "CASHIERING TECHNIQUES"

*The title should not fool us. So much more goes into this course than the name suggests, as Jennifer tells us here:*

"The Saturday 'Cashiering Techniques' class, led by Berta Morales, is a lively group. Each chimes in with an answer to Berta's questions, whether the topic be 'customer service', 'preparing an invoice' or 'labor law'. (Rather amazing topics for a course with this title, no?)

But these students weren't always so eager to speak up. As Maritza says, when she arrived she was so nervous about making



a mistake, she stayed quiet. Now she often volunteers her opinion. What made the difference?

Students say they have changed...they learn how to relate to the people around them with confidence. They mention learning self esteem, how to be a good leader, self expression and how to work as a team as among the most important. They also credit the fraternal atmosphere of the classroom and the Cultural Center as key to building their confidence. Idalia, mother of two young daughters, credits the Center's scholarship program for making her studies possible.

And students are already reaping the benefits of their new skills: Maria has a job with the postal service; Norma is still in high school but she studies better, thanks to the techniques she learns from Berta. All agree that being in the 'Cashiering Techniques' class is a special experience, one that has changed their lives for the better."

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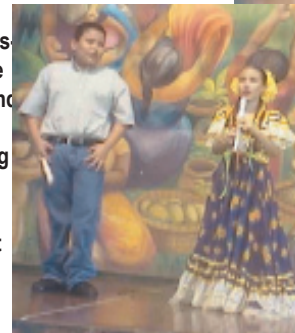
**THE FRIENDS OF BATAHOLA STAND  
IN SOLIDARITY WITH OUR SISTERS  
AND BROTHERS DEVASTATED BY  
HURRICANE KATIINA**

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#### END OF THE SEMESTER CELEBRATIONS

"On Saturday, July 10th, hundreds of students in Dance, Music, Theatre, Painting, Cooking and Handicrafts shared their learning with a full house of friends, family, and neighbors. The 'End of Semester Cultural Celebration' is a tradition that enables teachers and students to show off their new skills. It begins in the morning with a full show featuring performances by our young Performing Arts students.

The colorful costumes, intricate dance steps, and young voices carrying stirring melodies and harmonies, while confident performances by budding exciting



actors create an experience for all involved.

After the performances, all presenters and guests were invited to sample a variety of dishes prepared by the Cooking students. While they enjoyed their home-cooked lunch, they browsed a collection of paintings by this year's art students and admired the work of the Handicrafts students. This year's Cultural Celebration was a huge success, thanks to the hard work of Sonia Olivares (Teaching Area Coordinator) and Candida Martinez (Teaching Area Assistant), together with all of

#### RENOVATIONS WITH GIFTS FROM FRIENDS IN SPAIN

"Sewing teacher, Daisy Alvarez, says it all: 'Finally we made Sister Margarita's dream a reality---by renovating the Salon Gueguense!' She is referring to one of the oldest classrooms at the Center, where nearly 50 women study Sewing or Handicrafts Monday through Saturday. Sewing is the very first class offered at the Center, and Daisy was one of the first students. She has put her knowledge to good use since then, teaching hundreds of women how to save money by making clothes for family or to generate extra income by tailoring for others.

The renovations to this special teaching area were made possible by donations from Friends of Batahola in Spain (started by family of Father Angel after his death). Improvements include: enlarging the classroom space, repainting, replacing the floor tiles, adding air conditioning unit, and building two spacious closets for storing sewing machines, cloth and notions. At the same time, the Beautician school classroom also got a makeover: a new ceiling to replace the damaged one. Paint was donated from the Connecticut 'Quest for Peace' to give the walls a cheery yellow touch-up."

## MEET MORE OF THE STAFF

With each newsletter, we try to introduce other members of the Staff.

### ROSA URBINA

Rosa has worked at the Center since 1998 when she first assisted Sister Margie with a nutrition program for malnourished youngsters. She later studied sewing, took a course in computers and then became the person in charge of all of the Housekeeping. This is no small task, as most classrooms are open to the air with all of the dust that generates, not to mention the foot traffic with the comings



and goings to various projects. Rosa takes great pride in her work and remains an integral part of the Center's overall mission. Two of Rosa's three sons participate in the scholarship program. Walter is 11 years old and in

sixth grade at a local school. The oldest boy, Yader, is 17 and studies Mechanical Engineering at the university. Rightly so, Rosa takes great pride in her sons' accomplishments as both of them attain grades over 80% at their respective schools.

### CHRISTIAN CONTRERAS

Cristian teaches "Basic Adult Education, Level III", which is equivalent to fifth and sixth grades in elementary school. All of her students are adults who, for any number of reasons, have not had an opportunity to study in their younger years. (In the last edition of the Newsletter, an article described this course which has been offered continuously for twenty-two years.)



Cristian first came to the Center in 2000 to study computers and then took sewing classes the following year. Since completing her own college education, she has become a teacher at the local Carlos Fonseca Amador School which was highlighted in the last newsletter because of the close relationship it maintains with the Center. Cristian has been recognized for her excellence in teach-

## CENTER MUSIC STAFF SHARES WITH OTHER SCHOOLS

As part of the "National Chorus Week" held each year in Managua, the Batahola Cultural Center Chorus led two "teaching concerts". Over 600 students from the Teresiano School in Managua attended the concerts and so had the opportunity to learn from the Center's teachers, Mayra Velazquez and Juan Guido (*Reminding readers that Mayra herself received her own music education by studying under Father Angel from her very early years in Batahola.*) The concerts were a big success, inspiring many young people to become more involved in music. It was also a wonderful way to share with others knowledge gained through the Center's activities.

### A LETTER TO SHARE FROM AN OLD FRIEND OF Fr. ANGEL AND Sr. MARGIE.

Afer reading the last newsletter, Fr. Peter Hines, Carmelite Priest, wrote:

"We here at Tabor Community in Juarez, Mexico are delighted to see how the work continues. ...Mercy Sister Betty Campbell and myself had been in contact with Sister Margie and Father Angel when they were still working in Netza in Mexico City. ...We still have a photo we took in Nicaragua of the very first Mass...an Easter Vigil Mass... they celebrated in the vacant lot where they later built the Cultural Center.

We have followed the progress of the Center with at first annual visits there, ever astonished at their creativity and doggedness at getting that Center in operation. Each time they would have another program in opera-

*'May the Lord give us one more gift of a visit to your Center...to see and hear the beauty that, thanks to you all, continues to unfold there, so uplifting to a struggling Nicaragua and to folks wherever your music and message reaches.'*

tion and each time they would take us under their wing for the few days we were there. Their generosity knew no bounds.

May the Lord give us one more gift of a visit to your Center there in Batahola, and to see the lovely little garden-fountain where Sister Margie's and Father Angel's earthly remains are enshrined. To see and hear the beauty that, thanks to you all, continues to unfold there, so uplifting to a struggling Nicaragua and to folks wherever your music and message reaches. No doubt but that you all feel the moral and spiritual support of Angel and Margie as you go about your work in that place of joyous song, music, art, learning and blossoming young Nicaraguans."

## WOMEN BENEFIT FROM THEIR COURSES AT THE CENTER:

Jennifer Marshall writes: "Azucena Guzman is a student in this year's cake decorating class. 39 years old, she is a single mother supporting two young children. Before her youngest daughter was born, Azucena worked for a local restaurant chain, where she learned basic cooking skills. But she was



forced to give up her job to take care of the new baby. Looking to build new skills, Azucena took a quick cooking class at the Center last year, where she learned how to make cakes, but not to decorate them. This year, just halfway through the

Center's Cake Decorating class, Azucena is already putting her new skills to use making cakes for a local business. And she has started her own cake shop out of her home. Azucena sells between 7 and 10 cakes each week. At \$10. each, her cakes provide the family with a steady income. Her dream is to continue learning to make different kinds of pastries and to open a pastry shop one day. 'Professor Marcia is an excellent teacher.' says Azucena. 'She has a really good way of explaining to her students, so that we learn well.' "

### SOLIDARITY GESTURE OF BOSTON COLLEGE PROFESSOR

Some few years back, along with other college professors and administrative staff, Prof. Patrick McQuillan participated in a program called: "Global Awareness" which brought them into the heart of Central America and helped them to understand the social and political realities of the country of Nicaragua. Among other sites visited, Patrick was introduced to the Batahola Cultural Center and was impressed by the work being done there. Since then, he and his wife, Jody, have held a couple of fundraisers for the Center, the last in July which grossed over \$4000.00. The event was called "Buckmaster Gumbo Jam"... a day of local folk playing music and having a good time while raising money for Batahola. The musical performances included middle school, high school, college students and adults. A football, signed by the New England Patriot's 3-time Super Bowl Champion Coach, Bill Belichick, was raffled off. Campus ministry at BC helped to sponsor the event, as did a local restaurant, Vello's. More is planned for next year. The Friends of Batahola are very grateful for such a generous act of solidarity.

# REPORT ON THE CINCINNATI VISIT

In the last issue of this Newsletter, plans for a visit to the Batahola Center by 22 parisoners from Cincinnati were presented. Here are some of the comments made by members of the group following their days in Nicaragua.

**SUE KEEFE**, led the group: " I wanted all of you to know our trip went beautifully to Batahola. The team did an outstanding job. We gave out 300 of the 500 reading glasses that we took down with us. We painted the graffiti lined wall at the Carlos Fonseca School. We were entertained by



the violins and the dancing. We cried as we listened to the scholarship students discussing the plights of education with no possible jobs. Anne McSweeney was our interpreter and a pure delight. And, best of all, now our sons Michael and Dan have visited Nicaragua."

**MELISSA AUVIL**: "After driving through the desolation of the area, I found hope, love and beauty awaiting in the Cultural Center of Batahola. I found physical beauty in the murals and tropical gardens. I found spiritual beauty in the soft warm eyes and smile of Sonia and Josefa, Center Directors. I saw Christ in the joyful smiles of the poverty stricken children, in the kind act of one of our teenagers when he gave a cold soda to an old man and in the little girl twirling in

*'I am enriched beyond words by the generous nature of the people, their hope, their love, and their sense of community.'*

the dress her mom made for her in sewing class. I am enriched beyond words by the generous nature of the people, their hope, their love, and their sense of community. Now God has bound me to Batahola."

**MARY POMMERT**: "The half hour bus ride from the Managua airport to our accommodations at Casa San Juan was a good preview of what our week in Nicaragua was going to be like. My first impressions of the city was its suffocating heat, made worse by the smell of diesel fuel exhaust. The fumes seemed to suck the oxygen out of the air, making it feel as though each breath could be a last breath. ...signs of poverty were impossible to ignore. After one short bus ride through the streets of Managua, the naive optimism that we could help save Nicaragua had already given way to the notion that maybe we should cut our losses and run. Early the next morning, all 22 of us climbed back onto the bus and retraced our steps through the city to the suburb of Batahola. Surely, God, I thought to myself, there is something better in batahola. There was. It's the Batahola Cultural Center founded by Sr. Margie and Fr. Angel, now both deceased. We sat in on many of the classes offered at the Center: computer, accounting, cooking, sewing, literacy and art. Children danced for us

***Father Angel used to say that when a woman arrives at the Center she is very old, tired, and beaten down, but she grows younger and younger the longer she is at the Center.***

in native costume, while others took music and art lessons. The childrens' classes keep them off the streets, out of gangs, away from drugs, and in a safe place. What the Batahola Center really does, though, is offer each child and adult hope for a better tomorrow. Sonia, who teaches the computer classes, said that Fr. Angel used to say that when a woman arrives at the Center she is very old, tired and beaten down, but she grows younger and younger the longer she is at the Center. Sonia said that's because the classes build their self-esteem, and the women empower each other.... Without a doubt the poverty in Batahola is profound....but inside the Center, in the classrooms, hope surpasses in spades the poverty that lurks just outside."

**KATIE POMMERT**: "I'll never forget the first drive to the Batahola Center. I had imagined naked kids running around, abandoned buildings, and trash everywhere. Unfortunately, I was right and felt that our short time in Nicaragua would amount to nothing. When we pulled up to the gates of Batahola, I had a change in heart: The Center was beautiful, and it gave me an overwhelming sense of hope that we can make a difference....This is when I realized what the Center was all about. Batahola is a place where people of all kinds can come to get away from the hardships and poverty. At the Center, they are people in control of their happiness. Everyone I met at the Center was always smiling and optimistic. It changed my view on life and what is really important."



**CORRECTION**: In the last issue of the Newsletter, there was a photo incorrectly labeled "Mayra Velazques" Here is the correct one.





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## SPRING RETREAT

*In the last issue of the Newsletter, we offered the reflections of one of the Staff members on how she viewed the retreat. Here one of the presenters, Jeanne McManus, shares her own thoughts on the day:*

"For many years, we who knew Sister Margie, the co-founder of the Center of Batahola, have carried in our hearts her theme song, 'Tomorrow is a new dawn.' During the retreat in April, I realized that this continues to occur daily in the life of the Center.

Looking at the sea of faces in the room, I saw those who have been part of the years--the success, the struggles and present growth of the Center. I also saw the faces of the intelligent, eager, and creative new members of the Staff.

What a privilege it was to interact with over 36 teachers and staff members as they broke into groups. The groups discussed some of the powerful passages from the Gospel of Luke where Jesus gives His messages concerning: the poor, the need for hope in life's journey, the value of prayer, and the need for sharing talents, wealth, and noble leadership qualities for the good of all in the community. Needless to say, we also discussed what happens in the world community when these life-giving messages are ignored. Amazing insights were forthcoming from each group for the general assembly.

At the end of the day a meaningful ritual was held when every person at the retreat prayerfully stood up before the group and shared what they considered their personal daily gift to the on-going life of the Center.

In typical Nicaraguan spirit, before leaving the place of retreat, we had a joyful song and dance fest with accompaniment from talented guitarists trained at the Center. We, the visitors: Sister Marlene Fenlon, Sister Helen Prejean, and I, Jeanne McManus, are grateful for this spirit-filled experience.

**YES, TOMORROW IS A NEW DAWN**

## **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.

