

On their trip to Nicaragua last December -- their seventh -- Linda and Randy Klein went to the town of Posoltega where a mudslide triggered by Hurricane Mitch had buried 1700 people. Refugees were living in tiny shelters made of black plastic stretched over tree limbs. They call the camp 'Nueva Vida' (New Life).

"We witnessed no weeping. Instead, we saw a people with an indomitable spirit extending hands to one another in the process of rebuilding," Linda told a visitor.

The couple who live in Bridgewater, Conn. are members of CT. Quest for Peace, an ecumenical group that has been sending humanitarian aid to Nicaragua since 1986. They have two children, nine grandchildren, and many friends; and they operate a business selling printed circuit boards. Full lives, you might say. But their Nicaraguan ministry is an essential part of who they are. They consider it a "wonderful blessing."

"In 1991 a Presbyterian minister, reverend Susan Pheil, spoke to our Benedictine Grange community in Redding, CT. about her experiences in Nicaragua," Linda said. "She touched our hearts. I was very nervous about it, but a few months later we got brave and just decided to go."

They learned that the average life span in Nicaragua is just over 40 years, with 20% of the children dying before age five; that thousands of street children eke out a living by begging; and that the campesino's average wage is a dollar a day. For decades the people suffered under the cruel Somoza regime, followed by the war between the Sandanistas and the U.S.-supported Contras. Two years ago a severe drought destroyed more than half their crops. Then came Hurricane Mitch.

"That first trip was a transforming experience," Linda said. "We stayed with the Aviles family in a town called Nagarote. There was Mama and Papa, twelve children, and 34 grandchildren all living within a small community. They have very few material goods, and yet they're so loving and so willing to share. We visit with them every year and we've come to love them dearly. "

"I remember giving little Julio a twelve-inch chocolate chip cookie," Randy added. "He thanked us rather shyly. Then he ran into the street, unwrapped the cellophane, and called out to his friends. He broke the cookie into small pieces and divided it among them. That's typical of the way even little children care for one another.

Quest for Peace generally operates with structures already in place -- mostly programs run by religious groups. The Kleins are Maryknoll Affiliates and the Maryknoll Sisters direct them to the poorest of the poor. They work in tandem with Quest's partner in Managua, the John 23rd Center. "Quest is essentially one community reaching out to another," Randy said. "We listen to the people and try to respond to their needs. They return gifts of love and community."

Responding to the people's needs can mean building houses for the homeless; bringing a million dollars worth of medicine to the neediest by linking the New York Catholic Medical Mission Board with the Congregation of Religious of Nicaragua; raising \$15,000 to hook up electricity in one tiny barrio, funding a Sisters of Mercy program to teach former prostitutes how to make appetizers and desserts to sell; or giving over 1000 used computers to various educational institutions.

"Twenty of those computers went to the U.C.A., a Jesuit University with a law school in Managua. They didn't have any, and they had only two typewriters. In return, they give us 100 hours a month pro bono work with people in prisons. Most of the things we do have that kind of string attached."

Of deep concern to Quest is the plight of the thousands of street children. "The families are large and the average campesino can't feed all his kids so the oldest must fend for themselves. They beg and try to earn a few cordobas to help their family. Some of the children are orphans who have been beaten and abused. None of them get nearly enough food. And none are able to go to school."

Linda noted that heroic efforts are being made by religious orders and the Nicaraguan people themselves to educate the children. One such program is "Glenda's School" which a Nicaraguan woman has run for 26 years. Some of the pupils ride six miles on horseback to get to the school; others sleep overnight in a nearby church. Glenda takes no pay for her work with over 50 children.

Currently, Connecticut Quest is focusing on 350 of the most destitute street children. "They aren't allowed in school unless they have shoes and can bring their own supplies . "We're trying to raise money for that and for their food and clothing. At \$120 per child it's a daunting challenge," Randy admits. "But we have to do it because if we don't they won't get to school and more than likely they're going to die or suffer serious diseases as a result of malnutrition."

The Kleins' Nicaraguan ministry is a demanding one in many ways. At their projects in Nicaragua, they may sleep in hammocks outdoors and bathe with buckets of water drawn from a barrel. And there's the task of raising funds. With the help of their loyal Benedictine community, they hold an annual luncheon/auction. They also collect tons of rice and canned goods which, with other volunteers, they load on trucks at the Methodist church in New Canaan. Last year 9 truckloads were sent.

"Our friends worry about us when we go to Nicaragua," Randy said. "What they don't realize is that for us it's the happiest time of the year. When we retire we hope to spend more time there". Linda smiled. "We've fallen in love with the people," she said. "The gifts we receive from them far, far outweigh anything we've given."

To send donations:

Earl Utter, Treasurer
CT. Quest for Peace
3425 Old Town Rd.
Bridgeport, CT 06606-1026