

We tend the relationships....

Summer 2001

*...the projects we do are secondary
to the friendships we build.*

Ometepe Magic: The "Sacrament" of Sacramento

by Susan Koch, Bainbridge High Spanish teacher

Every trip I've taken with students has had its own magic. This year, however, the magic was overwhelming. We were one of four different groups of 5-7 students who went to four different towns. Our town was Sacramento, an extremely poor and somewhat isolated little town of 200 individuals on the shores of the lake between San Jose del Sur and Esquipulas, a town which became a "sacrament" in the hearts of the 8 people who went there! The people had had a wonderful experience with BOSIA in a previous visit of 3 days by Emily Mansfield, her sister, and her son. EIGHT of us arriving for TEN days certainly made an impact! It was "love at first sight" and the entire town and our seven students were deliriously enchanted. Host families began crying after only two days, just thinking of their new beloved "child" leaving. One elderly woman, her many children already grown, tearfully told me she never thought she'd have another child as she and her husband hugged their new daughter, Amy.

Our project was to paint the classroom that Emily's delegation had financed, and to replace the roof on part of the school. However, this project was only a small part of the total experience. I would find my students giddy with new experiences: riding horses, washing clothes, and simply loving being with their new families. The last two days were funereal and somber with grief at leaving. Now it all seems a dream, but our group, as well as the others, still meet and dream of continuing the relationship. We know the honeymoon will be over but deeper experiences will be possible.

Our student delegations fulfill the goals of BOSIA to create people-to-people relationships and a cultural



Learning to wash clothes in Lake Nicaragua. photo by Susan Koch

exchange for greater mutual understanding. After eight trips and chaperoning six student delegations, I am convinced of the power of young people to bond with families on Ometepe in a way that adults can never do. The experience is raw and profoundly human: all that hurries us in our too-busy lives here on Bainbridge falls away to reveal a deeper human reality. No matter how many projects we do nor how much money we pump into Ometepe, it is us, with maniacal schedules and materialistic lives who benefit from the fresh breeze of Ometepe's "lo humano."

Ometepe Hospitality -- *Muy Alegre!*

By Alice (Alicia) Mendoza

Minutes before the ferry from San Jorge docked in Moyogalpa, I was delivered a cold can of pineapple nectar. I was told Chepita's husband, a crew member, heard I was on board and wanted to welcome me back. Dorita and Chepita had spent quite a bit of time with my Bainbridge Island third grade students two years ago.

I was so touched by this simple gesture of Ometepe hospitality. A few minutes later I was brought to tears as I looked into the eyes of Luis Ernesto...no longer my 3-year-old *novio* from my last visit, but a handsome 9-year-old. He, his mother, and 2-year-old brother had ridden in the truck from Altigracia to meet me. FORTUNATELY, I had done more work on my Spanish and communicated pretty well, making the long ride home more meaningful.

My reunion with my host family was equally moving. Absolutely nothing had changed in my home. The only new items were inexpensive curio pieces I'd sent with past delegations. I was relieved to be able to communicate better and quickly as I was welcomed back to "my home." Although I missed having my son Andy with me, (he had been a BHS delegate six years ago two years in a row) I quickly adjusted, loving the opportunity and challenge of relying solely on myself in all my interactions. My week was full of good conversations, laughter, songs, *pupitas* and GO FISH games.

I have countless highlights but being with my former 3rd grade students Matt Colley and Andy Kelly (now high school sophomores), was a deeply rewarding experience for me. I was so proud of them and honored that they held true to their plan to visit Ometepe after being in my first ever Ometepe calendar classroom seven years ago. Sharing a visit to the Los Ramos Preschool classroom—funded by their class calendar project seven years earlier, I was moved to tears as I listened to them speak in Spanish to the watchful eyes of the entire school. What fine young men they truly are!

And then there was "Precious Grey," a current 3rd grade student who ventured with his dad to join us on Ometepe and live with Luis Ernesto's family for four days. Grey's gorgeous eyes and engaging smile delighted his entire family...all three generations. His *abuela* and *mamá* SPOILED HIM so he got all the attention I was used to getting! They hovered over him, cleaning him when he got a speck of dirt on his precious body!

Actually, being a fairly mature woman, I adjusted and loved to watch the interactions. Grey and Stacey spoke little Spanish yet they were loved and accepted with warmth and tenderness. Grey was such a wonderful ambassador from his class. He loved the manual labor of working on the Koss Koster library, funded by this year's calendar project. These eagerly engaged and interacted in every opportunity.

Grey came home and put together an amazingly colorful and comprehensive Power Point presentation of his trip, with the assistance of his family. He narrated this for both his classmates and the BHS student delegation's report to the community.

Ometepe is a very very special place. It will not be 6 years before I return.

Bainbridge Ometepe Sister Islands Association

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Non-profit organization



After 7 long years, visiting the Los Ramos Preschool.

Seven Year itch?

by Matt (Mateo) Colley

Seven years of waiting came to a wonderful culmination for me at Los Ramos school during the most recent student trip to Ometepe. We (Andy Kelly and I) along with Wilkes teacher Alice Mendoza arrived at Los Ramos to see the school we helped fund in our third grade class. Now High School sophomores, we were in Alice's first class to raise funds for Ometepe through the calendar project. It was in third grade that we first saw pictures of Ometepe, the kids, the communities, the schools. Those images remained ingrained in our minds and we made a commitment to ourselves that we would some day go to Ometepe. That day finally came...

We arrived to find the students lined up along the concrete walkway into the school waiting for us. As soon as we were in sight, the applause began. It was an amazing sight. We were connected to this school and this community by an unbreakable bond of caring and commitment. The whole experience was quite overwhelming for us all. It was as if the circle, begun in third grade, was finally complete. The applause eventually quieted and we spoke, in our minimal Spanish, with help of Dora as interpreter. We tried to translate our emotions into words, which is no small feat. We told them how much this project and the people of Ometepe meant to us. This experience and the people will forever remain in our memories and hearts.

ANNOUNCEMENT: We have recently received some donations towards building another small house for one of the poorest families on Ometepe. We are looking for friends who would like to share the \$1,000 cost. Call Lee Robinson at 842-0774 for details.

A Dream come true!

by Andy Kelly

When the day finally came to visit the Los Ramos School, I was nervous. We took a bus and then walked about 20 minutes down a dry, rocky river bed. When our little group (Mrs. Mendoza, Kim, Ela, Matt and I) arrived at the school, all the students were lined up on both sides of a cement path. We walked through the elaborately decorated entrance and the small teaching staff greeted us with hugs as loud applause carried on for over ten minutes while we sat there in awe. The students presented us with necklaces and recited poems. They then served us fruit and we had to be on our way. Seeing the school we helped build seven years ago was the highlight of my trip.

BOSIA birthday: 15 Candles!

by David Mitchell

Hard to believe it's been that long, but the Association will celebrate its fifteenth anniversary this Fall. To mark the occasion, we're inviting 11 friends from Ometepe to join us. While the purchase of eleven tickets allowed us to obtain an airline discount, the hard part was deciding whom to invite. The Board worked on the issue for several weeks this spring and made the final decision at the annual retreat in April. The aim was to select our guests from as broad a spectrum as possible on Ometepe, and a broad spectrum it is. Because of the lack of transportation infrastructure, Ometepe seems like a huge place, so it was important to find invitees from all over the island. Certainly the *Ometepino* visitors would be folks who've worked with Bainbridge Islanders on projects, but there have been a lot of projects. We also wanted to invite some young people, because they've been very important to the relationship on both sides.

So, who's coming?

Dora Gutierrez Traña: Dora is our office manager on Ometepe. She's also an English teacher and visited Bainbridge in 1996.

María Elena Martínez: Some remember Maria Elena from our first video, done in 1987. A primary school teacher and community sparkplug, María Elena helped organize the first Bainbridge/Ometepe project and is one of our oldest friends.

Lidia Lopez Perez: Lidia lives east of Balgüe in the *campo*. Lidia and her family have hosted several Bainbridge student and adult visitors. Lidia is a community activist and a warm and delightful ambassador from the Ometepe farm country.

Bernabé Lopez: Another longtime Bainbridge friend, Bernabé is a coffee farmer and member of *cooperativa* Carlos Díaz Cajina. He visited Bainbridge for our tenth anniversary party in 1996.

Emelina Barrios: Teacher, administrator and political activist, Emelina has worked on projects with the Association since 1990.

Karla Varela: Karla is a psychologist who practices on Ometepe. She attended university as one of the first Bainbridge Ometepe Scholars and is following in her family's tradition of giving support to her community.

Berta Olivia Alemán: As principal of the secondary school in Moyogalpa, Berta has been involved with student delegations since the earliest days. She has also been a mainstay with the Bainbridge Ometepe Scholars program.

Melania Avellan de Aly: Visionary, organizer and treasurer of the Moyogalpa BOSIA Scholarship program since 1992, Melania has worked hard to keep lines of communication open between our islands.

Amparo Soledad Amador: Soledad is principal of three elementary schools on the Southwest side of Concepción. She organized construction partnerships in San José del Sur in 1998 and 1999, and in Sacramento in 2001, and has been a frequent delegation host.

Freddy Ortíz: Freddy is a folk dancer from Altagracia who was a leader in the Ometepe-Swingin' Hepcats dance exchange.

Mayla Fernandez: Mayla is a folk dancer from Moyogalpa who was a leader in the Ometepe-Swingin' Hepcats dance exchange.

The Visit:

The Ometepinos will be here from Sept 27 to October 8 and we're beginning to plan for their stay. If you'd like to host a visitor for all or part of their stay, or if you can be available during the visit as a driver, translator or compañaro(a), please call David Mitchell at 842 6907 or Nancy Quitslund at 780-9422. We welcome your enthusiasm and involvement. If you have some Spanish, all the better, but don't let language stop you from contacting us!

Remembering what's important

by Andy Kelly

My experience on Ometepe was very enlightening. The whole atmosphere put me into a mental shock which I was unable to appreciate until I returned home. The community of La Savana (the town in which I stayed) was indescribable. Everyone was so nice and caring and polite, and most importantly, accepting. My family consisted of my father, Monge, my mother, Diega, my youngest sister Marlin (7), my other sister Alba (9) and my brother Diego (11). My house was made of brick and was quite large in comparison to the rest of the houses in the community. I had my own room with a wooden bed and the walls were made by stapling up black plastic. The animals around the house consisted of chickens, pigs, dogs, a turkey, chicks and little lizards. I ate three meals a day and on Ometepe, you are never hungry and never full, the meals are just right.

One experience that stands out was when I came home one night and my dad and two of his friends were sitting outside talking. I joined them, and for a couple of minutes I understood every word they said! I connected with my father and for the remainder of the trip, our friendship was just that much closer.

My group worked on the construction of the library in the elementary school in the center of town. We scraped the bricks with little chunks of brick (yes, it's true!) so that the bricks would be clean before the cement dried on them. It was hard labor in the hot sun, but we spent no more than a couple hours every day on it.

The culture of Ometepe has the same essence of community as Bainbridge, but in no way does Ometepe remind me of Bainbridge, physically. The biggest difference is that people on Ometepe work to live in their own style, they work at getting the most out of life. People on Bainbridge seem to work for money and forget what is important.



Making wild friends in the Tropics

A bold Challenge

by Dennis Magnussen, Pastor
Seabold Methodist church

This spring, Lynn (my wife) and I traveled with a delegation from our church to Ometepe Island in Nicaragua. There I learned that I can give up—a lot! I saw people scratching out a living from hard volcanic soil, people having clean water for the first time in recent history, children who were proud of who they were and proud of their school. There are a lot of people on Ometepe, about 35,000, and they seem to be filled with the joy of life, the joy of meeting God in their places of worship, the joy of seeing their children grow up healthy.

Oh, there are so many images that are running through my mind right now that I can't get them to paper fast enough. But, the biggest lesson I learned was that I can get along with a lot less in my life. So, I am beginning to take a serious look at the "stuff" in my life and asking the real question: "What can I do without, what can I give up?" Then just how can I make a difference in the world? With my soul searching, I make a pledge to really make a difference. Will you join me?

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Excerpts from my Ometepe Journal

by Alex Oechsli

Editors' note: Alex (12), was the youngest member of the February Seabold Methodist Church delegation.

Day, 5 Happy Valentines: This morning we gave our family Valentines gifts. The gifts were a story box with life savers in it, and a bag of candy hearts. After that we went to Nancy's house to wait for a truck to pick us up.

The truck would circle the smaller volcano called Maderas. Along the way we picked up a school teacher. There are so many kids they have to have two sessions, one in the afternoon and one in the morning.

We got back on the truck and the road we were traveling became increasingly bumpy and rocky. The roads here are not paved so they are very bumpy. When we got back my host gave me a *Pinole* which is the national drink.

We met about 70 of the town children at the church and we walked with them down to the river. On the way there my sister's host father rode up on his motorcycle and offered to give me a ride to the river. We rode once around the block and came up behind the group and then went up ahead to the river. After the walk we had dinner with our host families and representatives from the church. The food served was delicious it consisted of chicken, potatoes, fish, beet salad, *platanos*, beans, rice, and a drink made with all kinds of fruits.

After dinner we gave the church



Alex and his sister Annika relax together in a Nicaraguan hammock.

some money to finish the church and additional money for whatever they chose. We sang some of the songs we had been practicing -- one in English and then in Spanish, and they joined in.

Day 6 Feb, 15th : This morning we walked up to the CO-OP to meet the Weinstock group. After they finished breakfast we had to wait for the guide to come. When the guide came we split up into two groups. One group went to the coffee fields and the other went to the top of Maderas . I climbed Maderas with the Weinstocks, my mom, dad and one of the other people in our group. On the way up we saw parrots and a lot of insects, we heard howler monkeys that should have been named roaring monkeys! As we approached the cloud forest the trail began to get muddy and slippery. When we reached the first "mirador" (lookout) we had to rest and then go back down, we couldn't continue on to the top because it was too late and the trail just got worse. When we came back down we rested and then we went to a church service at 4:00. It was supposed to be a good-bye and a thank you from the families of Balgüe.

Day 8 Feb 17: We are now in Altagracia. After we had breakfast at the hotel we were staying at we went to Si a La Vida's old home. The Weinstock group was already there making tamales. They made them by slaughtering a pig then cutting down banana leaves, and then making *masa* from the *maiz*. They tied the tamales with string and then steamed them in a boiling pot all night.

After that we headed for the NEW Sí a La Vida compound, where the other half of the Weinstock group was working. The new Sí a La Vida is about 30 ft. tall, has a tin roof and it is made out of bricks, and has about 15-17 rooms. I started to help my friend Sam clear out rocks from the garden . After we did that we went down to the beach and went body surfing. The waves were perfect so we body surfed until we had to go back to the project.

After lunch at Doña Dora's - we had noodles, home made tortillas ,

black beans and rice- we went to the local museum . We saw a model of the island, some pictures of petrogliffs, some funerary urns and some statues made of lava. In the afternoon I went swimming again with my mom, sister, and Cora at a rocky beach that was calm and had no waves so I couldn't body surf. The next day we inaugurated Sí a La Vida with a party, food, speeches and fun.

Obituaries *By Nancy Quitsland*

Bob Drew, BOSIA coffee bagger, cheer leader, and former board member died on April 17, 2001, his 62nd birthday. His life was a blessing to thousands of people he served in his churches before “retiring” six years ago, as well as to those he touched after moving here in 1995. While on Bainbridge Bob was actively involved in Kiwanis, Campfire, League of Women Voters, Interfaith Council, Seabold’s Youth Group, and BHS Key Club. He loved and served youth all his adult life. Bob was always ready to apply his energies and unfailing positive attitude to any social justice effort he encountered. We’ll miss him.

On April 2, 2002 our beloved **Mercedes Verela**, “la Mercedita,” of Altagracia, Ometepe, died of an infection following a serious case of shingles. She was a tiny 83 year old woman, with a huge heart, who welcomed Bainbridge Islanders and Nicaraguans into her house with warm embraces and made us all feel like her children. She spent her life working to take care of her home, her children and grandchildren, and her community. We will miss her beautiful smile, infectious laugh, and loving spirit. *Adios compañera.*

Mercedes Varela y Robert Drew Presente!*

**A Nicaraguan saying for fallen heroes and martyrs, meaning their spirit lives on.*

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MARK THIS DATE IN YOUR CALENDAR!
Be there or be ?



**Saturday, October 6th --our FIFTEENTH
Anniversary Fiesta!**

(see related article on page 4. Full details in the Fall issue)

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