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Next Stop, Managua

Bus ticket to Nicaragua an eye opener

Antonio Somoza's white Sears Kenmore oven occupies an entire room of the small 80-year-old dirt-floor house not far from Somoza's old beach hideaway in San Juan del Sur on the coast of Nicaragua. On the eve of the Sandinista revolution that preceded Somoza's death in nearby Paraguay, most of Somoza's neighbors were content to loot small items from the Somoza villa. Silverware, paintings and art pieces went quickly.

For the Calderon family though, the small knickknacks would not do. They backed a borrowed truck up to the plush retreat, and—in the middle of a revolution with effects that still reverberate throughout the hemisphere—they took Somoza's oven.

"They felt they had been cheated by Somoza and his cronies all their lives," said Judy Chadderdon, a 22-year-old Palo Alto who last week returned from a year-and-a-half-long stay with the Calderons. "The oven is really a prized possession. In some small way it gives the Calderons a sense that at last they have turned the tables on Somoza."

Chadderdon, on leave from studies at UC Santa Cruz, left for Nicaragua shortly after her 21st birthday. With \$1200 in cash, a duffle bag, a backpack and a bus ticket, she was on her way to Central America. She also took with her the same commitment to social justice that characterized the students of a generation ago who left school to join the freedom riders in Mississippi.

"I'm a Latin studies major," explains Chadderdon. "I just came to the conclusion that I could learn more from actually being in Latin America than I could from any books or lectures, no matter how well they were presented."

So, over the objections of some friends and family members—and without the resources usually accompanying extended field study in a foreign country—

Chadderdon hit the road.

Shortly after arriving in Nicaragua, she landed a job teaching English to students at Managua's Sandinista-controlled University of Central America in exchange for food and a promise of help finding permanent housing. Two months later she made her way to the coast where she was "adopted" by the Calderons.

A year-and-a-half later she returned wearing Sandinista fatigues and without the duffle bag, the backpack, money or even a good pair of shoes. She also returned fluent in Spanish and with a deep love and admiration for the Nicaraguan people and for the family that befriended her.

"I got stopped in El Salvador on my way home because of my outfit," Chadderdon says. "They don't very much approve of people walking around in Sandinista-issued fatigues in San Salvador. They thought I was a guerrilla!"

Chadderdon, whose statuesque good looks and self-assured manner no doubt helped the itinerant student during her journey, is eager to convey a message from the Nicaraguans she worked and lived with.

"Everyone I talked to wanted me to take home this message: we love the American people, we do not love the Russians; we want to be friends with the United States."

Chadderdon says that the war of attrition between the US-supported *contras* and the Sandinista government has been taking its toll on the Nicaraguans. "Just in the year-and-a-half that I was there, I saw things getting worse. It's the people of Nicaragua who are suffering because of Reagan's policies, not the Sandinista government," she believes.

Chadderdon found that food is becoming scarcer and more expensive all the time. "Our diet was mostly beans and rice and when there weren't beans," she recalls, "we ate rice."

Her hosts, the Calderons, rely on family-owned carpentry and bakery businesses that bring the 11-member family about 15,000 cordobas a month. With a Nicaraguan cordoba trading for one-tenth of a penny on the black market, that means the entire family must live on the equivalent of \$15 each month.

"Life is hard for them," Chadderdon says. "But it always has been."

Nicaragua's leader, Daniel Ortega, recently extended the age of draft eligibility to include all men between the ages of 25 and 40. Males over 16 are automatically drafted and normally serve until they're 25. Ortega recently claimed that the increase in draft registrants was necessary to prepare for a possible American invasion.

Chadderdon hopes that the presence of American visitors in Nicaragua will help decrease the likelihood of a US invasion. "I kept bumping into people from UC Santa Cruz," she laughs. "It was amazing."

Though Chadderdon left for Nicaragua without any group affiliation, groups such as the Witness for Peace organization place Americans there for short or long-term stays in an effort to enhance the chances for peace.

"I don't think there is really going to be a full scale war between the US and Nicaragua," Chadderdon allows. "I don't think most Nicaraguans really think it's going to happen either."

To her surprise, Chadderdon discovered that Somoza still has defenders left in San Juan del Sur. One of them, a former valet named Francisco, grew teary eyed when he talked with Chadderdon about Somoza's generosity over a few beers in a bar not far from the Calderon's house.

"He told me that Antonio and Donia (Mrs.) Somoza would often walk along the beaches at San Juan del Sur and that people would come up to them with their tales of woe and ask them for money," Chadderdon

remembers. "Somoza never carried cash so he would just write an amount on a piece of ordinary paper which people could take to one of the Somoza family-controlled banks."

Somoza's brutality and his iron grip on virtually the entire economy of Nicaragua prior to the Sandinista revolution are widely believed, within Nicaragua, to have been the causes of his downfall according to Chadderdon.

"They feel insulted when they hear someone say that the Russians or the Cubans are responsible for their revolution," Chadderdon remarked, although she also said they do admit freely that they will take help from whatever sources offer it.

"The whole thing," Chadderdon concludes with many hours of lost sleep reflected in her bright but tired eyes, "is that we are making friends into enemies."

Back at her family home in a quiet residential section of Palo Alto, Chadderdon has gone back to her old job at a neighborhood delicatessen. She now spends most of her time slicing cold cuts and cheeses and plans to return to UCSC next September.

One thing about being home is very different though. In Nicaragua, Chadderdon said she always felt safe walking home alone at 2am. "I know it may sound strange to people who have never been there," Chadderdon admits, "but despite the war, despite the shortages of food and supplies, despite everything, the place just felt safe."

"I don't feel safe walking home alone at night in Palo Alto."

—Hal Plotkin