



Hermanamiento News

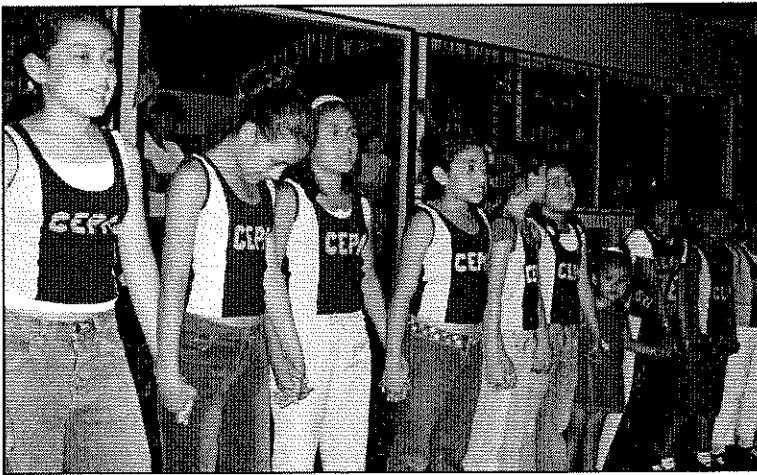
Sister Communities of San Ramón, Nicaragua
Durham and Raleigh, North Carolina
and Henniker, New Hampshire

Spring 2007

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San Ramón Children Go Off-Broadway



San Ramón performers and spectators alike enjoy the opportunities visitors provide for cultural entertainment.

By Bonnie Axelrod

Who said you can't always get what you want?? As a retired child therapist I had missed the openness, energy and creativity of children. A desire for warm weather and to be doing something helpful, fun and interesting, I described my skills and interests to Lonna—and she made it happen!

In the winter of 2006 my husband Marv and I traveled to San Ramón, stayed with a lovely host, Melania Arista, and I "worked" daily at the San Ramón Library — la biblioteca — four hours, every morning for two weeks. My wish — fantasy — was that I could bring lots of art supplies and spend time with the children there, getting to know them, offering opportunities for them to be creative and have fun during their extended vacation from school. Coffee harvest time means that children often have to help their parents pick coffee, so schools are closed for almost two months.

My Spanish is limited, so with my dictionary always close by, I managed to gather a group of about 12 children between the ages of 5 and 12, who arrived at 8 a.m. every weekday morning for two weeks. On the first day, as I walked to the library, whenever I saw some children, I combined a few key words — la biblioteca, ahora (now) with showing them what I had in my shopping bags — markers,

construction paper, crayons, bubbles, sidewalk chalk. I gestured for them to come with me. In the space of a day, the word got out! The children were delightful, creative and wonderfully patient and helpful with my attempts to speak with them in Spanish.

Each day for the final hour — after writing and drawing about their families, school, and future career hopes, my husband Marv arrived, and was greeted with great enthusiasm, to teach them new songs and help them choreograph their own songs.

At the end of two weeks, with several warm and generous helpers, I organized and produced a talent show. A guest list was compiled which included the mayor, police chief and the priest, as well as the members of the Sister Communities of San Ramón. Children invited their parents and siblings. All of the children's artwork was put into books and hung on the library walls, including a large mural they created depicting their vision of

Nicaragua. It included lovely mountains, narrow rivers, palm trees, red flowers, the sun, bright blue sky, houses, horses and, of course, people. The girls recreated their dances, (learned from the previous town librarian, Sonia) costumes and music. Marv's singing group had its debut. We all decorated the courtyard with balloons and crepe paper chains. Luckily the almost daily rain shower held off! Berthalina, an English-speaking Finca Esperanza Verde staff member, volunteered to give each girl a manicure with little flowers on each nail, the day before the Great Event. And day of — she put makeup on them! The neighborhood children, who, attracted by the not-so-every-day happening, joined the audience and were given front row seats.

The show was a great success! After the production, I loved offering the guests' refreshments and a tour of the children's artwork. The people of San Ramón are so friendly and generous; I enjoyed returning their hospitality. The best part for me was feeling like I did what I came to do. The children and I got to know each other, create together, have fun and include the whole community. And apparently, the entertainment part of the show has now become a regular part of the cultural offering to tour visitors to San Ramón. So, yes, you *can* get what you want—but I got so much more!

From Nicaragua's Kitchens

Sopa de Lentejas (Lentil Soup)

By Sylvia O'Connor

One chilly January evening in San Ramón Ann Rivers and I enjoyed wonderful lentil soup in Yelba's kitchen. On my recent trip back I was able to talk to Juanita, Yelba's cook, about the recipe. Here it is:

4 tbsp butter
1 small onion, very finely chopped
1 small sweet red bell pepper, very finely chopped
3 cloves of garlic, minced
2 medium tomatoes, finely chopped
salt and chopped cilantro to taste
1/2 lb lentils
6 cups of water; more if needed
3 medium potatoes, peeled and cut into bite-size pieces

Melt the butter in your favorite soup pot and sauté the onion, bell pepper, and garlic until softened. Add the tomatoes, salt, and cilantro. Wash and remove any debris from the lentils. Add to the pot with the water. Bring to a boil, reduce heat and simmer

until lentils are almost soft — approximately 30 minutes. Add the potatoes and continue cooking until lentils and potatoes are done, about 10 minutes more. You may have to add more water. Serves 8 or more.

When I tested this recipe in my kitchen I added a couple tablespoons of Lizano Salsa just before serving. This is a staple in most Nicaraguan kitchens and is available in the Latino food section of some local grocery stores.

How people visiting San Ramón on eco-tours become part of the community

Did you know Brian told the women at the "farmacia" (pharmacy) that he will study and learn how to make lye from wood ash? He and Renee are planning to return next year to teach the soap-making process from ash to market! Renee cried from San Ramón to Matagalpa. She, like her mother, did not want to leave.

Crocheting is alive and well in San Ramón. Nubia, Maria Teresa, and Dona Blanca are hard at it. Nubia sold 2 shawls and 6 purses to ecotourists. I brought back 7 purses from MT and Nubia and 2 shawls from Dona Blanca. I have sold 5 of the purses already. Ivania and Neyda have asked me to teach them to crochet next year so I guess I will be going back.

— Sylvia O'Connor, Raleigh, NC

Sister Communities of San Ramón: Durham and Raleigh, NC, and Henniker, NH

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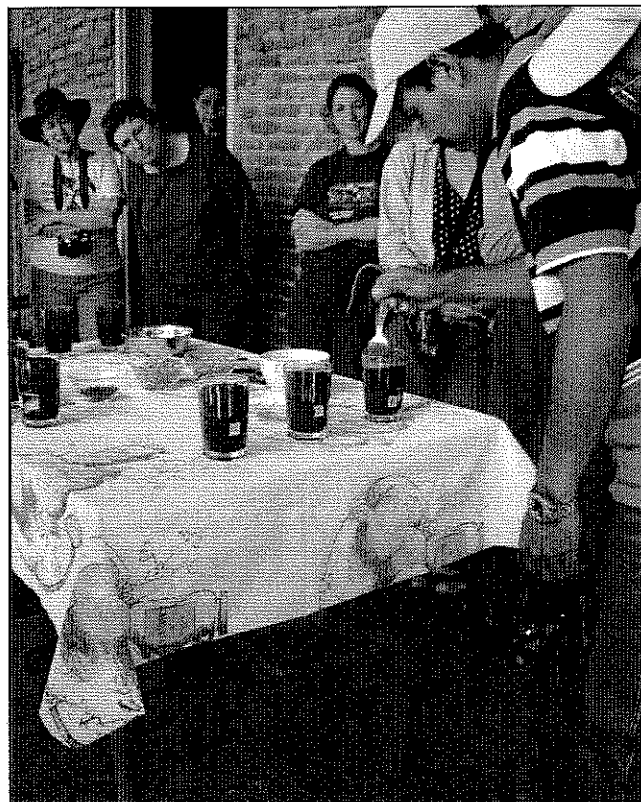
Finca Esperanza Verde Wins Top Ten in Nicaragua's Cup of Excellence!

The Cup of Excellence is held in coffee-producing countries once a year to determine the very best coffee. FEV coffee was declared a TOP TEN coffee in Nicaragua, from among hundreds of coffees, on April 25!

By Lonna Harkrader

Just after becoming a sister community of San Ramón in 1993 it started to dawn on us that coffee was one of the region's best hopes for economic development. We paid whopping amounts to small coffee growers in San Ramón for their organically grown coffee long before there was such a thing as "organic certification." It was just what we believed would encourage cultivation of the kind of coffee we wanted to drink. We carried large amounts of green coffee beans home in our suitcases, had them roasted in Durham and then sold the coffee by the pound. Later when we partnered with people in San Ramón to create a sustainable tourism business in 1998, we continued to believe that making the lodge and coffee farm a model for organic, sustainable, and environmentally correct practices was the way to give San Ramón a reputation that would attract visitors and coffee buyers.

Then when Counter Culture Coffee, a Durham coffee roaster, came to San Ramón with our ecotour groups in 2001 and 2002, they shared with us, our staff at Finca Esperanza Verde and a group of small organic coffee farmers their vision for cultivating the best coffee in the world. They said we could do it and we believed them. Now we are well on our way. We can see that hard work and attention to all the factors making a coffee the very best in the world apply to our small farm just as they apply anywhere. Peter Giuliano especially inspired all the organic fair trade certified growers in San Ramón to shoot for the moon! And



Javier Martinez, one of the small coffee farmers of San Ramón (front right), conducts a coffee cupping (tasting) at his coffee farm for a group of ecotour visitors.

now we can see that all the hard work paid off. Finca Esperanza Verde's stiffest competitors in next year's competition will be the other small coffee farmers of San Ramón with whom we are co-members of the Organic Coffee Co-operative of San Ramón. The coffee is also fair trade certified.

Growing a top ten coffee requires a tremendous amount of dedication every step of the coffee beans' cultivation and processing. We are tremendously proud of our staff who tend the coffee at Finca Esperanza Verde every day of the year with the utmost attention to the nuances of the coffee plants and growing conditions. Too much fermentation or not enough is not acceptable to our "mandador", Pascual. He gets up before dawn every day of the coffee harvest, December through February, to make sure the fermentation of the previous day's harvest is JUST RIGHT! Since Finca Esperanza Verde coffee is grown organically, quick spraying with pesticides is not an option. Instead, the coffee is scrutinized daily 365 days of the year to determine what the plants need for nourishment so that they are strong and resilient enough to withstand blight. Making compost is an art form at FEV as any of the guests visiting our eco-lodge who have helped out with this activity will tell you. The soil is rich and shaded by the tall tropical forest canopy.

Being at Finca Esperanza Verde, especially during the coffee harvest, makes drinking coffee a whole new experience. And sitting in one of the lodge rocking chairs sipping a cup of coffee while looking at the migratory and tropical birds flying all about is one of life's sweet pleasures.

A Letter of Thanks from San Ramón

April 13, 2007

To Friends and board members of Sister Communities of San Ramón

Appreciated friends,

Receive my greetings, friendship, and thanks for all the help that my community, my people, have received from you and from all of the generous people who have helped with money, with work, and with donated material aid. You have been of much help to the people of this community. Rural school children have benefited from the program of sister schools. These students have so many needs that for the lack of a pencil and notebook they don't go to school and because there is no adequate building, many children are not in school. This program of sister schools has been a big help to the rural sectors.

The donation to Los Pipitos of physical therapy and psychological services: we are seeing big results. Attention to the old people (program for senior citizens): We see the happiness reflected in their faces when they meet and share a meal, dance, song, bible readings, etc. The same is true of the art and ceramic classes that have been of great benefit.

The water projects in the rural communities that drink contaminated water and the water project in the city of San Ramón are of much importance to improve the health of the population. The same may be said about the protection of the sources of water.

The support for the municipal library and the band bring joy to our community and we improve our musical culture. The ecotourism project at Finca Esperanza Verde benefits many people through the guest house families, local guide club, craftspeople, etc. We are all happy to be of service sharing our homes, and foreign visitors can learn our history, our customs, and develop friendships which fill us with happiness.

This organization has been of much benefit for our community. We have received much help, much love and what we are most thankful for is the honesty and transparency of this organization.

My thanks to all those who have given a little bit of their heart to my people. May God the Father bring you many blessings.

With a warm embrace for all of you,

Marina Escorcia Pineda

President, Sister Community Committee

Resident of this community which my grandparents founded

(Our partner organization in San Ramón, headed by Dona Marina, meets monthly to review the requests for funding SCSRN receives and much more. Yelba Valenzuela directs our office in San Ramón and coordinates all sister community related affairs with our partner organization.)

European Union Praises November 5 Presidential Election, Calls for Reforms

(Reprinted with the permission of the Nicaragua Network Hotline, April 3, 2007)

Claudius Fava, leader for the European Union (UE) Electoral Observation Commission in Nicaragua, stated in a press conference that "deep reforms are necessary" in order to fortify the independence of electoral administration and the participation of all political parties and forces in future elections. His observation commission was made up of 150 experts in electoral issues, and was present in Nicaragua from September 23 to December 10, 2006, in order to follow the whole electoral process, including the results phase and the publication of the final results.

Fava emphasized the need for the Supreme Electoral Council (CSE) to establish mechanisms to control the financing received by political parties. He also recommended reducing the number of magistrates as well as a selection process that guarantees impartiality and an independence from all political parties. Currently there are seven magistrates all of which are connected to the Sandinista or Constitutional Liberal Party and the rules for choosing these magistrates continue to favor these two parties.

According to the final report on the Nov. 5, 2006, elections, the electoral process "was managed appropriately, giving rise to competitive elections." Fava stated that the electoral process, won by Daniel Ortega, "was a significant achievement for the people of Nicaragua, with massive participation, and peaceful unfolding. Nicaragua ratified its commitment to democracy," he said.

Ecotours for 2008

Eco-tours are now being organized for 2008 including birding, yoga, nia, school partnerships, all about coffee, and cultural immersion. Eco-tours include delicious meals, a rich variety of experiential learning activities, stays in our award-winning eco-lodge (*Smithsonian* magazine's Sustainable Tourism award, TO DO! Award for Socially Responsible Tourism, recognition from the UN agency on tourism as a model for sustainable tourism to end poverty – STEP, Best Eco-Lodge in Nicaragua...), horseback riding to visit area farms, glorious hikes, phenomenal birding, cooking classes, relaxing, and cultural presentations. Please visit our web page to learn more.

<http://www.fincaesperanzaverde.org>

Ecotours Are a Huge Success

High school students from Durham Academy formed a sister school partnership with the rural school of Bailadora #2 this year after they visited while on an experiential, cultural immersion ecotour designed especially for them. They found the teachers and students of their sister school to be very enthu-

siastic about learning despite the limitations of their school and very appreciative of the opportunity to be partnered with school children from the United States. Rural School Partnerships are formed when a group (usually a school) in the US and one of the 61 rural primary schools of San Ramón, decide

to become sister schools. The project is directed by Yelba Valenzuela, head of our office in San Ramón, and Sally Poland, a Returned Peace Corps Volunteer from Raleigh, NC, and also a member of the SCSRN board of directors. For more information call Sally Poland at 919 828-2607, sapoland@earthlink.net.

Beautiful. This is the only way that I can possibly describe my experience in Nicaragua. When I woke up to fog-enveloped mountains on my first morning at the Finca, I quickly grabbed my camera and started snapping photos, trying to capture the awesome beauty of the landscape. I must have taken at least ten pictures before I realized the futility of what I was doing. The land was so natural and perfect that it couldn't be captured by a camera or expressed with words. One cannot understand its beauty without seeing it firsthand. In addition to this natural beauty, the cultural beauty of San Ramón was particularly memorable. My host mom, Doña Blanca, was so welcoming and accommodating that I felt as if her house was my own. The staff at the Finca exhibited this same warmth as they enthusiastically taught about their lives and culture. Both the sincerity of the people and the beauty of the land made my experience absolutely incredible.

— Sean Sketch, Durham Academy, Class of 2008

Simply put, every time I go to Nicaragua a part of my heart stays there. When asked if I would be returning for my spring break this year, there was no hesitation in my answer. I had to return. In an inexplicable way, the beautiful and unique atmosphere that greeted us in Nicaragua, grouped with the amazingly warm and open people at the Finca Esperanza Verde and in the town of San Ramón, took root in my heart in such a way it will never be able to be uprooted. My first trip to Nicaragua gave me a sense of direction in my life, the second changed how I look at the world, and treat the others around me. I found a new family that I love dearly, and that teaches me something new every waking moment. Never before has one experience impacted my life in such a way.

— Emilia Sotolongo, Durham Academy, Class of 2008

As I went into the Nicaragua trip, I had a general idea of what I would see, but I never could have predicted the genuine, cheerful atmosphere that was given to me by my hosts. In addition to changing the way I think and how I view the world, I became part of a new family, made up of the people I was traveling with. I couldn't have asked for a more humbling and fulfilling experience, plus the food was pretty much amazing. I also enjoyed getting to know my friends in a new way that I never could have done just at school. The trip gave me time to think about the values I hold and how I can change them by taking into account an understanding of how other people around the world live.

— Laura Haynes Durham Academy, Class of 2009

Thank you profusely for opening such a wonderful experience to us. Alex and I have traveled extensively in developing countries, but always to work. We've been employed in Malaysia, worked in a hospital/clinic in Haiti, been on Habitat for Humanity builds in Peru, Ghana, and Malawi, etc. This is the first time that we have been on a trip to a developing country where we gave nothing, but instead were there to receive the generous hospitality and to be totally immersed in what the people and country had to offer. It felt great, after the initial shock of being waited on and pampered. To be able to be part of an ecotour that provided a source of income to the people while allowing them to show their natural resources, skills, and knowledge with pride, was very rewarding. I learned a great deal and had a wonderful time.

The other inspiration was all of you. The projects supported by the Sister Communities team were amazing. That a few people could make so much difference in the lives of so many was a wonderful thing to witness. In our present world where all of the news is of destruction and death, a small group of faithful witnesses engaged in a positive movement is a hopeful sign. Although Alex and I try to stay current with national and world situations and have tried to participate in organizations and movements that we hoped would make a difference, we are very isolated where we live and don't have much of a support group. Sometimes it is very discouraging. Spending time with you and some of the other active members of your group was refreshing and helped give us a new boost of energy and hope. Thank you! Thank you!

— Carol Neubert, Canton, New York

It was a wondrous trip. I can't remember the last time I felt so carefree, appreciated things around me and just was at peace. Thank you for all you've done to bring the farm and the ecotour to us. And thanks for creating a place for com-

munity between us here in the triangle and the people of San Ramón. I am still inspired by Cesar's talk and how people can live through adversity and still have hope and love.

— Sue Cook, Raleigh, NC

New Manager for Finca Esperanza Verde

By Lonna Harkrader

Melvin Castrillo, from La Bonaza on the Atlantic coast of Nicaragua, has been doing a fantastic job managing Finca Esperanza Verde for the past year. He will be ending his contract June 30 and returning to the United States to be with his family. Melvin rose to the challenge of managing FEV with great ability, thoughtfulness, and enthusiasm. Melvin, living in the guest house of Dona Blanca Rosa for the past year, has worked far beyond what the job required of him.

Melvin and I have been in close contact since February about the hiring of his replacement. Hugo Panti arrived April 28 to see whether the job of managing the farm would be a good fit for him. He is very excited about the prospect of managing FEV and Melvin thinks he will do a great job.

Hugo, a dual citizen of Belize and Guatemala, is married and has a five-year-old daughter. He is fluent in both Spanish and English. Hugo writes, "I grew up in the western part of Belize where I attended primary school (elementary), high school, and junior college, and in 1990, I received a scholarship to study for a bachelor of science degree in Tourism Management and Environmental Conservation at the University of South Florida in Tampa, Florida. I returned to Belize in 1992 after graduating and immediately started working as a tour guide for different Belizean-based tour operators. I also have to make mention that my father was in charge of the Maya site of Xunantunich for 30 years which became my second home and where my tourism interest was born. That is where as a child and young man I guided my first tourists and continued doing so during school vacations until I graduated from college, and then started doing real guiding all over Belize and parts of Guatemala."

"My work in tourism in Belize became recognized in 1994 when the Belize Tourist Board with a USAID small grant appointed me and other tour guides and tour operators to get together and develop a Tour Guide Training Manual so that we could help our tour guides become more professional and eventually become officially licensed. The manual was finished in 1995 and I was appointed to be one of the facilitators for the Tour Guide Training Unit. From 1995 until 2002 I worked for the Belize Tourist Board and the Belize Ministry of Tourism and the Environment as a Tour Guide Trainer and as a Consultant designing and planning strategies to implement the management of Wildlife Sanctuaries and Nature Reserves. Some of these were eventually declared National Parks."

Hugo later worked as a tour guide for a London-based tour operator, leading groups in Mexico and through Central America, and moved on in 2003 to a consulting job with Conservation International to work in sustainable development in small communities such as Peten (Belize), Isabal (Guatemala) and around Copan (Honduras). "Our job was

concentrated in educating communities in conservation efforts and sustainable ecotourism, mainly training them on how to start their own businesses as small ecotour operators, small eco-lodges, small restaurants, and ecotour guides. The project was a big success...."

"Birdwatching has become one of my passions with my life list consisting of 454 species."

"Over the years I've learned that with every new venture there comes a new challenge. It is left to us to conquer this challenge. If conquered, it gives us that great satisfaction that makes us move forward with dignity and determination to face new challenges. The good part now is that we've gained more experience, learning from the good deeds fulfilled and the errors and mistakes committed. All of these things happen because that is our nature, and simply because we are human beings."

"As you know, many operators today are looking for places with low impact, off the beaten path tourism. Nicaragua is all about this and we can strongly start approaching these tour wholesalers that believe in this, and I can assure you, there are many looking for this. Also, constant updating of the website with more actual pictures and information will make a difference."

"Marketing also involves the general service. The daily contact with guests is so important and I know the FEV staff is already experienced. I want to share more ideas with them, ideas and experiences that I've gotten from visiting and observing other eco-lodges in other countries."

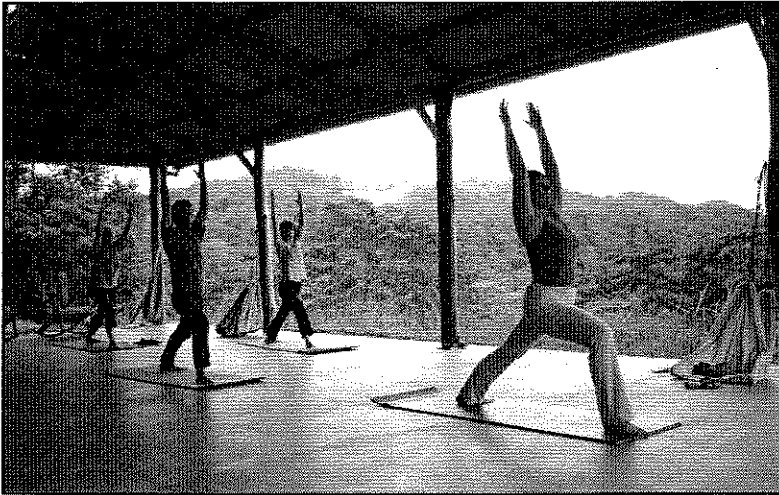
"Another thing, I want to take the tourist guide club under my wing. As you may have seen in my resume, I trained guides in Belize. I have an updated copy of the training manual used there of which I contributed to the first and original one. Again, I don't want to teach them, I just want to share ideas and show them and elaborate on their roles and responsibilities. Go out in the field with them and share guiding techniques, tips, and information. There's nothing better than learning that the guests have gone back home with the highest impression and the experience of their lives. The service staff are the ones that actually create the best marketing for a place like this. Word of mouth marketing is probably the best strategy to increase business."

"I want to get involved in this project with this job and help contribute to the betterment of a people and the entire human race."

Hugo and our FEV staff await you with open arms.

We send a fond farewell to Melvin and hope that he will visit often and perhaps even come as an ecotour leader.

Yelba Valenzuela, our first FEV manager and co-developer, continues to work for SCSRN as director of our sister community project including the in-town portion of our ecotours.



At left, our yoga pavilion was completed in 2007 and our first yoga classes were taught in February by Daina Urbaitis (right), a massage therapist and teacher at the "Yoga Spot" in Durham. We are grateful to Appalachian State University students who helped with the construction in May 2006.

At right, visitors to FEV include two new Sister Community board members Nancy Maloney (second from right) and Alex Freerman (far right). Nancy is SCSRN secretary. Enjoying the evening with Nancy and Alex are (from left) Richard Harkrader, SCSRN treasurer, Kate Gutmann, former board member, Daina Urbaitis, and Lonna Harkrader, SCSRN president.



At left, the Municipal water project sponsored by the SW Durham Rotary, Matagalpa Rotary, and Rotary International moves ahead with the drilling by CARE of the well. The well surpassed the most optimistic projections for water quantity. In fact the amount of water produced per minute was so great the device used to measure it could only gauge 150 gallons per minute although the amount of water was much greater! The next step is installing the correct type of electricity to power the pump.

We invite your participation!

Include me as a Sister Communities of San Ramón, Nicaragua, partner. Enclosed is \$_____ to support health, education, and community development projects in San Ramón. A minimum contribution of \$25 (or whatever you can afford) ensures that you receive the newsletter. Sister Communities of San Ramón, Nicaragua, is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. Please make tax-deductible

donations payable to: Sister Communities of San Ramón, Nicaragua, 1320 Shepherd Street, Durham, NC, 27707

Call to get involved: (919) 489-1656;

info@san-ramon.org

And please visit our gorgeous web pages:

www.san-ramon.org and www.fincaesperanzaverde.org

We thank the following for donations and support:

Sister communities:

Raleigh, NC, Durham, NC, and Henniker, NH

Rural School Partnerships:

East Chapel Hill High School

Cub Scout Pack 451

East Garner Magnet Middle School

Durham Academy

Congregations:

Durham Friends Meeting

Eno River Unitarian Universalist Fellowship

Unitarian Universalist Fellowship of Raleigh

Sacred Heart Cathedral

Holy Trinity Lutheran Church

Watts Street Baptist Church

Businesses:

Phil Marsosudiro for consulting with SCSRN to determine the governance of our expanded organization

Pulley, Watson, King and Lischer, PA, Attorneys at Law, for free legal work

Flywheel Design for designing our new logo and t-shirt

Pam George, artist, for t-shirt design

Grass Roots Press for printing our newsletter

Counter Culture Coffee for roasting & promoting our coffee

Blast Internet Services for hosting our web sites

Ken Howard, PA, CPA for preparing our tax return

Burning Tree Productions for producing our ecotour video

Penn Bottling Company

EcoQuest Travel

Clubs and Universities:

John Gerwin of the NC Museum of Natural Sciences and

John Connors and EcoQuest Travel for installing a permanent bird banding station at FEV

Appalachian State University Prof. Brian Raichle and appropriate technology students for major improvements at FEV, May 2007

Southwest Durham Rotary for the librarian's salary and construction of the town's new water system

Rotary International for construction of the town's new water system

District Rotary 77-10



Sister Communities of San Ramón, Nicaragua
1320 Shepherd Street, Durham, NC 27707



Please join us for the Campaign for San Ramón School Children at a Special Benefit Sunday, 5-7 p.m. Sunday, May 6 at the Eno River UU Fellowship, 4907 Garrett Road, Durham