

# RADICAL TEACHER

A SOCIALIST, FEMINIST, AND ANTI-RACIST JOURNAL ON THE THEORY AND PRACTICE OF TEACHING

## In My Nicaraguan High School: Giving Excluded Women and Men a Second Chance

by Margaret Morganroth Gullette



A WOMAN WHO IMAGINES GETTING HER DIPLOMA AND THEN A LAW DEGREE, WITH HER "DREAM" WRITTEN ON THE SLATE, 2004. NOTE BROKEN CHAIR IN THE HIGH SCHOOL PREMISES THAT WE BORROWED ON SATURDAYS UNTIL 2017. PHOTO BY FRANK ZOLLERS.

**I**n 1989, with Reagan's Contra war still raging in northern Nicaragua, my husband and I went to a small, impoverished fishing village surrounded by 250 square miles of subsistence farms and revolutionary cooperatives on the Pacific Ocean in the remote southwest of the country. San Juan del Sur had just become the sister city of Newton, Massachusetts. In the three months we lived there, I started on the long journey that leads from capitalist alienation and bourgeois individualism through the various forms of tourism, to the discovery of the collective and to whole-hearted identification with vulnerable others. The contrast between my two states, geopolitical and psychic—my formerly passive, self-absorbed North American state of mind, and my new Nicaraguan-grown selfhood—could not have been more extreme than it felt then. We stayed that first time for three months—sent as delegates of Newton's Sister City Project, to see if we could figure out how best to help the people—and that stay changed our lives.<sup>1</sup>

Transformations occur to those on the ground, not to those looking on, as David Runciman says (in the *London Review of Books*) about the people who actually Occupied Wall Street, or Boston, or *something*, versus those who watched it from home on their phones. My self-transformation came about through education. Mine came through *theirs* and is still going on with no end in sight.

## How We Began

Among my San Juan acquaintances in the 1990s was a public-health nurse, Rosa Elena Bello, who was running a clinic for poor women and children with a Belgian doctor, Patricia Claeys, who raised the money for it in Europe. First thing I did was run a small fund-raiser in Newton for their *brigadistas de salud* (the basically-trained public health reps who lived in the villages) so they could each have a medicine chest with bandages and antiseptic, etc., and then I raised money for a cow-buying program to provide milk for the dozens of malnourished babies the clinic had been seeing. After those two completed attempts, Rosa Elena came to me again, with a determined look and a giant problem. She and Dr. Patricia had expected that after the clinic's first five years of dedication to providing health for pregnant women and their children, all the nasty statistics (high rates of infant and maternal mortality and morbidity, kwashiorkor) would have abated. They hadn't. But they had figured out why. The women were illiterate. Words on posters baffled them. They couldn't follow medical instructions. They couldn't tally their change in the market to see if they were being cheated. They lived in a world that could not make sense to them. They had missed out on education. When they were young, their villages did not have schools, or they, being girls, could not attend; and no elementary school would accept them now. What the region most needed was a literacy program for women.

Rosa Elena, solemn, laconic, and impressively earnest, wanted me to translate their proposal into English and look for funding in the States. I had never written a proposal for anything but a crossover nonfiction book of my own, on the middle years of life in the United States. I didn't have the

slightest idea whether there were philanthropic resources in the States for Third-World basic education for adult women. But their projected program made sense to me, as the daughter of a first-grade teacher and a former college teacher myself who was beginning to know something about the conditions of poor women's lives in the barrios and in the *campo*, as well as the slightly more substantial levels of the teachers in town. The project was based, of course, on the world-famous literacy program of the Cubans after their revolution in 1959. This was adopted by the Sandinista government immediately after the triumph of their revolution in 1979. The Sandinista program, which sent young people from the cities into the countryside, was also successful in some ways, but it lasted only six months, which is not actually long enough for literacy to take hold. In any case, that renowned initiative had taken place decades before, and it had missed many people, especially rural women.

Rosa Elena's project had serious outreach, a feminist curriculum, teacher-training, and monitoring. I did the necessary and eventually, after 24 rejections, found funding for one year from an Italian feminist sociologist, Flavia DeRossi Robinson, who had immigrated to the United States when Italy was still post-fascist. After that first approval, my grant proposals found donors somewhat more readily. Funding has been a continuous struggle for me and my loyal and active Advisory Committee, but dealing with the vagaries of foundations and soliciting individual donors is another story. The Sandinista revolution had been feminist in principle, but the government had done little to put its money where its mouth was. Adult education never became a priority. In all these years we have never received any funding, or even textbooks, from any reigning political party.

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My visionary friend, Rosa Elena, now a doctor herself, ran our literacy programs with gifted teacher-trainers, as she has continued to do since at the Free High School. They found a woman in every one of 44 villages who had at least a sixth-grade diploma, and taught these "monitors" some basic pedagogical techniques and how to use the workbooks. I called the curriculum "Paolo Freire for Women," because the first workbook used vocabulary that women care about. The first full word the women students wrote on their blackboards was "feto" (fetus); and by drawing and cutting out paper body parts and putting them up on an outline of a human body, like Pin the Tail on the Donkey, they learned to say the proper names of the genitals, which had been shameful or obscene, or slang that only men could use. We used the word "feminismo."

Just having them speak up in class, stand, walk to the blackboards, and write the freshly-learned letters in words demanded self-assertion. Just teaching them the basics that men knew—arithmetic as well as reading—helped level the gender playing field a bit. It gave the women confidence in areas where they had been helpless, like possessing basic information in family conversation, or monitoring their children's homework. And because we covered adult themes like poverty and power relations and women's rights, all the women in a village or barrio knew important concepts that the men in their families had never learned as boys in elementary school.

Our two programs eventually graduated over 300 women who had earned their sixth-grade diplomas after only three years of study. It turns out women learn fast when they are adults and hungry to learn, and when what they are taught matters.

And then our graduates wanted to go on to high school. Of course it had to be free, like the literacy programs. The Free High School for Adults, I call it. "El Instituto Libre Para Adultos Margaret Morganroth Gullette" is its formal, letterhead name. (Rosa Elena named the school after me, without asking,, They all call it "El Margaret" for short. In Spanish I say simply "El Instituto Libre.") The wonder to the students is that it exists at all, and some know that I do the major part of the fund-raising, and that it isn't easy. I used to say, every Opening Day, "Study hard this year, don't waste your time, don't miss a day, because I don't know if we'll have the money for another year." I still worry; every year to come is precarious. The students are grateful to Dr. Rosa Elena, now the rector, and to the executive director, Maria Dolores Silva, and their teachers. They are simply (with no obsequiousness), openly, frankly, grateful. To hear some of them, on a short video made in 2016, go to <https://youtu.be/l5XljrlfYsq>

The wonder for me, still, is that the Free High School provides second chances for all the people, men as well as women, who have earned sixth-grade diplomas but whom the regular public high schools nevertheless exclude: the pregnant girls, the women raising children (but *not the men* who fathered the children if they are under eighteen), anyone over eighteen, people who work Monday through Friday, and anyone who lives too far from the local daily schools, which are open only to youngsters. The government required us to include men, and our feminism decreed that men also had to be exposed to smart women teachers and able sister students as well as to the topics we add to the official government curriculum: women's rights, human rights, environmental stewardship, and reproductive justice.

The Free High School thus welcomes the woman of forty who was made pregnant at fourteen and had her second baby at sixteen, and the man of thirty-five who blew off further education for a small paycheck at thirteen. It welcomes the cane cutter and the cleaning women whose fathers put them to work in their early teens, when they would have liked nothing better than to be like the *borgués* kids and go to school in a smart uniform every day. Eventually, for our students, as grade follows grade,

and a certified diploma caps it all, the successful learning experiences and the good results that follow from winning a diploma seem to bury the self-reproach, the remorse, the bitterness toward one's parents, the rage at early poverty, and the waste of those lost years.

Our motto is "Empowering Women and Men for Life." "Life" is a big word that needs to be filled with meaning. Our curriculum includes a demand for social activism: providing literacy training, or doing environmental clean-up, or working with the Health Ministry against dengue or rat infestations. Other parts of the curriculum, and the gender relations in the classroom, open a whole positive world, of rights and responsibilities, and possibilities. So supporting that Free High School of possibility, which opened in 2002 and in 2016 already had 1001 graduates, is my constant anxious obsession, and Rosa Elena's, and our pride.

How we attract these special hard-to-reach students, and then how our teachers teach them—and what they teach our teachers, and how the students change—are my next themes.

## How the Barriers Came Down

Faculty dedication is everything in a program of this kind, no matter how rich the curriculum and the required civil activism. The first students to enroll in 2002 and for some years afterward were reluctant as well as yearning. Racialization is by skin color, and many rural people are darker and more indigenous-looking. Class barriers existed everywhere one looked. Most students were the first in their families to attend high school. Many people were way older than eighteen, and age worked as an extra kind of class barrier. Many had not stepped into a classroom in decades. The timid under-served (whether they were 18 or 54, Spanish-looking or with Olmec or Chinese features) had to believe, but truly believe, that they had the brain power to handle secondary learning as well as the better-off thirteen-year-olds in the daily high schools. That they could learn in one long day on Saturday—from 7:30 A. M. to 3:45 P.M.—what the younger got five half days to learn. Our students had to get over the humiliation of wearing flip-flops when those kids sported fancy sneakers.

Outreach persuasion was the first necessity. Our teachers were, and are, midlife Sandinistas, almost entirely women, who had unexpectedly benefitted from the first wave of higher education provided to the working class after the 1979 revolution to get their college degrees. Now these college trained, called *licenciadas*, had to start building up self-esteem in this neglected and immiserated populace. They had to help the mothers plan how to find child-care during the hours they would spend in class. They had to encourage men embarrassed about their work-hardened hands. The administration—my budget—also had to provide notebooks to the neediest.

At first, the students knew so little about "education," or the promises of education, that they didn't know what it might consist of, or lead to, or what to wish for. Rosa Elena had the brilliant idea of asking them to discover, name, and write down their "dream." People wrote a sentence on

a small black slate board. A photographer who was present sent me photographs of these written dreams. One of the many: "I want to be a professional for the sake of my son"; "an educated woman"; "to study law."



A WOMAN WHO IMAGINES GETTING HER DIPLOMA AND THEN A LAW DEGREE, WITH HER "DREAM" WRITTEN ON THE SLATE, 2004. NOTE BROKEN CHAIR IN THE HIGH SCHOOL PREMISES THAT WE BORROWED ON SATURDAYS UNTIL 2017. PHOTO BY FRANK ZOLLERS.

Soon enough, though, whole families started to attend, the younger siblings, the cousins. When family members attended our graduations, they marveled at the dignified colorful robes and the tasseled mortar boards, were gratified by the ceremony and elevated speechifying. (*Just like the real high schools!*) Bright graduates started to head out of town for yet higher education, to technical schools, even to universities. They did well. Over a third of our graduates have higher degrees. Soon our word of mouth was terrific.

One family I know has three generations of women who have earned their diplomas. Scarleth, the latest, graduated in 2016 at the normal age of 17. Aracelys, her mother, started with us in her thirties, and with her diploma in hand went on to get a teaching certificate. She now receives a monthly salary from the Ministry of Education and teaches a rural 1-6 multigrade, like the old one-room classrooms of North American pioneer history. In that village I saw Aracelys teach three different math lessons to a class of 18 children, all quietly, diligently writing in their notebooks. The discipline comes from the absolute respect owed her as a teacher. Her mother, Concepción, had been a cleaning woman in the dirty, rundown and over-crowded Health Center. When Aracelys initially balked, she encouraged Aracelys to attend by saying she too would attend. After she and Aracelys graduated, in the same year, Concepción got a nursing degree. The Ministry of Health hired her as a nurse in the same Health Center where she had cleaned floors and toilets.

About 56% of our graduates are women, rescued, as some are eager to tell me, from lives spent in unwanted child-rearing and backwoods macho oppression and boredom. Ernestina, a woman who lives near the Costa Rican border, about as far away as you can get from the port town of San Juan del Sur, says, about the day she learned she could go to our Saturday School, which was as soon as we opened in 2002, "*Gloria!*"

Now, with so many graduates in each village and barrio, our reputation brings many eager impoverished and under-served people. The School is known for having better discipline than the daily high schools. With excellent teachers and the same accredited diploma, there is no shame in attending El Margaret. The rural parents let their children with sixth grade diplomas, usually age thirteen, attend now. Fewer rural parents are now stubborn, or afraid. The ex-superintendent of schools, Dorquis Muñiz, formerly one of our literacy and math teachers, tells me that now a good half of the rural parents actively want their children to attend our village middle schools as soon as they finish elementary school. In one family I interviewed where a daughter and two sons of different ages had all graduated in the same year (and the floor of the house was, as usual, dirt), I asked the parents admiringly, "How did you encourage them?" They looked at each other a little dubiously. The father had previously said, bashfully, that he'd had no high school schooling, and the mother probably had even less. They didn't know what a high-school curriculum comprised. But they trust that it is valuable. He said, smiling, "We told them to get up early and study hard."

Structure was the other basic for outreach: We opened our middle schools in 12 villages, so farmers and housewives raising children, and children too young to ride the buses, can attend for the first three years. The middle schools meet three afternoons a week, for four hours. The Saturday School in town offers the same three years plus two more, for five years of schooling leading to the diploma. Everyone who graduates from rural middle school has to attend the Saturday School for the last two grades of high school in order to be taught by people with college degrees. Donors, including American Jewish World Service and Random Acts, provided a free bus that brings the rural students along one main road from far away, because a high private bus fare had long prevented many from attending.

But in the Saturday School, although tuition is free, someone in the family has to have hard cash for the notebooks, a pen, a lunch. Two of the town girls I knew from the Battered Women's Shelter came to me this year just before School opened. (One, then 13, had been prostituted by her mother. She lived in the shelter for eighteen months and earned her sixth-grade diploma by studying with a volunteer tutor.) Both teens have children now; neither works. They both want to attend. Even with me, who knew them in that bad time, they are slow to admit why they can't register: neither can afford the notebooks. One also doesn't have the requisite jeans and white shirt that we decided to require because otherwise the clothes snobbery is off the charts. This is not Africa, but it's the third-poorest country in our hemisphere. Even paltry [sic] costs are crises for some subsistence farm families or under-employed townsfolk. You have to keep remembering how deep the poverty goes. You have to keep reminding yourself.

## What the Teachers Had to Learn

Teaching is what makes all these successes possible, once you consider recruitment and retention and encouragement as part of teaching in our cultural conditions. The Saturday teachers with college degrees all knew their materials well. (Most teach in the daily high schools and work for us on Saturday. They tend to lecture, despite our best efforts to encourage discussion-leading.) Yet showing up and teaching what you know is scarcely enough. It was a learning experience for them, figuring out what is different about our students, compared to the adolescents attending the daily schools who don't work and don't have children and can afford notebooks, uniforms and cell phones.

The differences between our teachers and our students come down to class and income. No teacher is well paid by the government, but they all receive a secure monthly salary and live in the contemporary port, with its library, convenient shops, and resort atmosphere. They are not only more cosmopolitan but also "professionals." "Profesor," or "licenciado(a)" (college-degreed person) are the titles for high-school teachers. These are terms of the highest honor in a country where university education is rare and almost 65% of students still drop out of the daily high schools without a degree.

What did the teachers need to learn to teach well? (always a good question to ask, even in developed countries.) Some started off condescending to the students, the way people can be who feel walls of difference separating them from others who earn less, have a harder time managing birth control, keeping their white clothes pristine, or controlling machismo in their daily lives. Why couldn't these students be on time? The guys were to them "chavalos vagos," lazy good-for-nothings, bad boys, drunks. The poor were "humildes," I used to be told approvingly, as if humility were a quality to be encouraged. The *campesinos* and the maids and the fishermen didn't look you in the eye, they didn't talk out of turn. They didn't talk at all. It wasn't clear they could learn, or why did it take some of them until age seventeen to pass even the third-grade, as Fidel Pavon, now an installer of biosand filters for the Newton Sister City Project, confesses on the YouTube video about his early life? Were they just plain dumb?

Eventually, the teachers learned. They could explain to me what I was already seeing with my own eyes. Who among our students can afford watches? Did they want to work in the cane fields at age thirteen? In some villages, in the 21<sup>st</sup> century, there is still no electricity. An iron is what it was in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, a metal wedge heated over an open fire. Water might have to come into the house by the bucketful, carried on the heads of girls from far away. We don't demand uniforms, but yes, a white top and blue pants or skirt (the Nicaraguan flag colors). Esprit de corps, said my girlfriend, Rosa Elena, who was a rural girl who dropped out of high school at the time the guerrillas were forming, when the Somoza dictatorship was harassing her and her friends if they gathered in groups of more than three. And it is terrific to see a passel of students approaching the School in blue and white. Think how

amazing it is that everyone turns up in a clean white shirt. Some woman's work is behind that every time. *Know that. Know why.*

The teachers recognized that our students can be tired. One fisherman told me how hard it was to keep his eyes open all day after coming back on Friday from days in the Pacific fishing grounds; he confessed that his math teacher went too fast for him. If you have been out of school for ten years, you have to relearn your primary-school math. To each teacher's patient ethnography, add her need to read the face of silent incomprehension. Then, add knowing how to restate so the light falls in the right way.

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In the early days, before the free bus, the private bus schedule deposited all the students from the south late on Saturdays, and some of the teachers scolded them as if it were their fault. Ernestina, coming all the way from Tortuga on the bus, told me that was an injustice, and rude. "So I shouted back. I'm an adult, I know my rights. . . Everyone had to settle down, be polite." "I was not just a student," she told me, not apologetically. "I was a mother, a worker. I had a lot going through my head. I had to cook, get the children ready for school. The teachers wanted us to concentrate." Add human patience to everything else teachers need.

Humor. Knowing how to play is important, says Mayra Solís, one of the teachers who has been with us longest (and is the principal of the daily public high school). Mayra tells me this story.<sup>2</sup> Some men do come to class drunk. She told Isaac if he didn't "feel well" to sit in the back of the class. She was afraid he would go out in the street and get hit by a car. He put his sleepy head on his desk.

This was in the Margaret. It was a geography class on the "Littoral." Did they know what it meant? No one answered, so I explained and asked, Can you mention beaches on the coast near San Juan del Sur? Suddenly Isaac jumps up out of his seat and starts singing the anthem to San Juan that goes, "Escamequita, el Toro y la Flor, playa Hermosa, Remanso y Ostional/ son playas que visten de encanto." [He was naming the famous beaches. "These are the beaches dressed in enchantment."] Bottom line. . . with this drunken person we accomplished [an] objective of the class. It was a good experience because his companions applauded.

I always say, "We have to seek strategies for this type of young person." Isaac succeeded in graduating.

Dorquis Muñiz tells me about Ramon, another adolescent often seen lying in the gutter. One day he came to our Executive Director, the compassionate Maria Dolores Silva, saying he wanted to enroll in the first year, or seventh grade. Maria Dolores admitted him and asked him

to help her open up and lock up. He stopped drinking Friday night so he could be sober on Saturday morning. He defended his senior monograph, required of everyone, ably. He graduated.

The successes—graduates year after year, wearing their togas, holding their diplomas, over a third going on to higher education—helped all the teachers, like the students, see possibility where some had seen only hopelessness.

Many teachers eventually became expert explicators of the conditions of their students' lives. Lupe, from rural Cebadilla, who went through the School later, said, "All the teachers and the director treated us as equals."<sup>3</sup> Many teachers are able to tell me, in empathetic detail, how difficult it was for students to pull their lives together enough to attend for an entire year, and then another. Every conversation with a student is another patient ethnography. The teachers here were already working to level the gender- and class-based playing field by offering instruction leading to the diploma. But giving these students opportunities to succeed took much more. Empathy, listening well, finding the right location every time on the spectrum between incapacitating pity and incapacitating toughness, comprehending gender differences, formulating the helpful sentences, welcoming the small steps of liberating accomplishment.



A GRADUATION, WITH MARGARET IN ATTENDANCE, 2013. PHOTO BY DAVID GULLETTE.

I interview some graduates every year, so I learn first-hand from their age autobiographies what they suffered and what they learned, what they are accomplishing and where they want to go next. Now they know there can be a next step.

## What the Students Say They Learn: Claiming the Word

In our classrooms, many students learn most of all not to be timid. Centuries of humbleness, hammered into

children by their parents, enforced by the Somoza dictatorship and the feudal conditions of work, are worsened for many by having grown older now, in the "modern" world, where revolution is supposed to have brought equal opportunity, but inequality has grown; and they lack the skills or knowledge supposedly connected with age. They come to us bearing that bad feeling of being "too old" and left behind. And then the School undoes this learned helplessness.

One midlife woman, Nohemi Orozco, who started with us in 2002, finally received her degree in 2015, after interruptions that included adopting a child, illness, raising her own children. It took 14 years to finish, but now she teaches adult literacy. When I interviewed her, she said,

My mental attitude, despite my age, is that I am not staying behind. Right now I am studying English, they gave me a scholarship, and then, over and above English we'll see what happens, because the truth? I don't think I will stay put here, let's see what comes up later.<sup>4</sup>

Marlene Roque, one of our most accomplished graduates, says she learned "how to speak" in the school. She speaks for many when she explains,

I enriched my vocabulary with people, because in the High School I had teachers who helped me break a barrier, which was timidity, and they always sent me to make speeches, and thus I went about breaking the ice, and now speaking doesn't frighten me.<sup>5</sup>

As her Spanish improved, she felt more sure of using her words, of her ability to make an extemporaneous speech. At her graduation, she took the microphone, to energetically call on the national government to help keep the School running. (Some students know that in all 15 years we have never gotten a dime from the Ministry of Education, and it makes them indignant.) Marlene became a community leader, using her political voice to help bring her village a school building in the face of opposition from the then-superintendent of schools. Then, when we established a middle school in her village, she became one of our own teachers; then an assistant in a diabetes clinic. She is getting a university degree in psychology at the same time.

Two of our own graduates teach in the Saturday School. One, a woman who came originally from the *campo*, teaches Spanish. "I write estimates better," a 34-year-old welder told me, who also says he talks better. Many students tell me this, proudly and gratefully. Speaking well in any language means overcoming the traps of class, although we may not think of ignorance and poverty in such verbal terms. People who don't read, who can't spell properly, don't speak properly. They have funny accents. Pronunciation is a gross class barrier. Our teachers modeled better pronunciation. Some probably

graded on it, whether they knew it or not. They taught correct grammar, not only in Spanish class. Assignments in all the subjects expanded the students' vocabularies (as Marlene mentioned). Social studies, geography, history, and math gave them analytic tools, through keywords on many new topics. This is otherwise known as "information" and "concepts." The teachers gave them space to speak, by listening. This is actually literal space, because here students often stand to respond. Those who can do it take up space, they take up class time. Their minds expand into this time and space as they talk.

I think of ignorance and freedom in verbal terms in part because I know this problem personally. I came to San Juan del Sur ignorant of Spanish, and thus mute. Literally mute. That first year, during the Contra War, I didn't know the simple formula for condolence when I met a mother of one of the dead soldiers. When I touched her hand in solemn greeting, I was too humiliated to look her in the eye. In all the succeeding decades, I set about acquiring better speech little by little. (Reading novels in Spanish, so good at dialogue, I still memorize vocabulary I may be able to put to use.) Is this a question of raising my class level? Yes, although not obviously, as I am white, borguesa, and in the eyes of my local acquaintances, *acomodada* (*comfortable*, the polite word for *wealthy*). Moreover, I know punctuation and I publish op-eds in Spanish in the national newspapers. This is much respected. Still, stupidity is what it feels like not to *speak* well: my grammar mistakes, my silence when I hit a vocabulary wall, thus my inability to express myself, to recognize a joke, not to mention being incapable of making one. This kind of ignorance is a class marker of a different kind. To be not worth talking to, or listening to, is a profound human demotion. For years I felt I was not the equal of the *campesina* with the worst accent, not to mention our teachers. I have been ascending the class ladder of speech but I will never be equal.

I just went through a small dinner party with a great Nicaraguan writer, I believe creditably. But I refrained from initiating subjects whose vocabulary I don't know (like literary criticism, I who hold a Ph.D. in comparative literature). So I do uncomfortably believe, even today, that I know something like the shame of being tongued-tied. And the liberation, the self-confidence, the openness, the happiness, of, yes, free speech. In the beginning is the Word.

The ability to speak –especially when it is developed by adults painfully aware of their deficiencies (who know they had never properly learned grammar or spelling), who never imagined they would be articulate and certainly not eloquent, is empowerment for life, in any walk of life, in any part of the world. It brings a kind of equality that has nothing to do with fancy sneakers, the right clothes, money in the pocket.

Making a living comes first of all, as it must. Ernestina (the one who shouted "Gloria!" when she learned she could attend) now buses all the way from her village to sell products like basil pesto in the gringos' Saturday market. She has a lively inquiring look, an eager manner, ready speech, and a son who graduated from the FHS and is

frustrated that he can't find work except as a fisherman. For many, the empowerment of speech, the experiences of learning and activism, and the diploma itself, bring more equal human relations, if not necessarily more desirable jobs. The economy fails them. Social/ linguistic and economic inclusions, however, modest as they may seem to people in the global North, are the cognitive and emotional pre-conditions, I have come to believe (or at least hope), for more radical collective change from below.

## Their Great Successes and the Big Tasks Ahead

This is the understanding soul of socialist democracy: to be able to see without prejudice that in these lifetimes there was nothing but a long history of inequality and hopelessness, and then a long personal and familial struggle, all on mere wispy dreams, and then to see without illusion how the economic struggle continues despite the diploma. "La lucha continua," can mean either "The struggle goes on," or "the continuous struggle" (the accented syllable tells which). I often repeat it to myself, both ways, about funding this odd indispensable School. The students say it all the time. Once you really *get* that story and that proverb, you admire any source of empowerment and any degree of motion forward. "Your high school is changing the culture of the region," a vice-mayor, the late Rosa Adelina, said to me one day. "Your students look up, they look you in the eye, they say their piece. They even disagree."

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*Ambition*, that all-important word, which covers so much more than liberals think who don't know such populations or such a national history, becomes possible. The School creates self-interest, to be sure. We would fail if we did not. Here that means the basic sense of *having a self*, and then of being competent, equal to many tasks. Nohemi Orozco says on the YouTube video, at minute 7:50, "Before, I was going, 'I can't, I can't.' Now [she says, flashing a sudden smile] I feel prepared for *any task*." I knew the "values" of education—critical thinking, for example, clear writing, debating ability. The Free High School does not succeed brilliantly there, although some of our graduates go on to university, and many more could be admitted and go, if they could get scholarships. But when I interview graduates, I recognize many other intangible values. Self-possession, self-assertion, once embodied, can operate in any realm. *Ambition* can include emulating Sandino, who fought the North American-installed Somoza dynasty in the 1930s, or the *comandantes* (some of them women) who led the government in the boldly experimental but perilous 1980s, after the revolution and during the Contra War.

Rosa Elena, who is twenty years younger than I am, steeped in Sandinista history and myth, and dedicated to keeping the School operating, come what may, says we are “forging leaders.” So I would like to believe. I look at their government—run by a “president” who in 2016 when he was reelected for an unconstitutional extra term made his wife his vice president—and wonder what our eventual leaders might accomplish given this context. What will chance and history bring? Meanwhile we at the School are doing what we can to go on, to produce 1001 more educated people who feel they are part of their society, who operate on a more equal footing, and have the tools to go on improving on their own. So the future has some openness. Time will tell how political our graduates try to be, if they dare. Even our oldest graduates have only fifteen years of “life” behind them, and now their children and grandchildren attend.

All we hear about the effort they made is their rejoicing—well-deserved self-satisfaction, I am happy to say. And quite justified. “I sacrificed,” the graduates say. “I got up at four AM to walk through the jungle.” “I had to cross nine ríos, overflowing, in the rainy season, carrying my notebook over my head.” “My parents let me out of chores three afternoons a week.” “I had to bring my baby to school that first year. It was okay. Plenty of boys made more noise than she did.”

*To donate to the Free High School for Adults, send a check to Treasurer Don Ross, 211 Winslow Road, Waban 02468, made out to Newton SCP-FHS. Or go to <https://sanjuandelursistercityproject.wordpress.com/contribute/>*

**The Newton-San Juan del Sur Sister City Project is a registered 501(c) (3). Your donation is tax deductible.**

## Notes

<sup>1</sup> See “The Contagion of Euphoria,” my essay about my first years in Nicaragua and the literacy programs, which won a Daniel Singer Millennium Prize and is available on their Website, <http://www.danielsinger.org/gullette.html>

<sup>2</sup> My translation, from an email, February 26, 2017, that followed a conversation. The punctuation and accents are as was.

Esto fue en el Margaret estaba [yo] dando la clase de geografía y el contenido era Costas de litoral del pacífico estaba el alumno Isaac adentro del aula pero había llegado ebrio al aula de clase y no lo había determinado cuando pase Asistencia si me di cuenta y le dije si no se sentía bien se ubicara en la parte de atrás del aula por temor a que saliera a la calle y un carro lo atropellara. Comencé la clase y preguntó para explorar que entendían por litoral nadie contestó luego les explique después preguntó pueden mencionarme las costas del litoral del pacífico especial san juan del sur y de pronto sale él de su silla y comienza a cantar la letra del himno a san juan del sur que dice Escamequita ,el toro y la flor ,playa Hermosa ,remanso y ostional son playas que visten de encanto..... total con esa persona ebria cumplimos el Objetivo de la clase fue una experiencia bonita porq todos sus compañeros lo felicitaron por eso siempre digo debemos buscar estrategias para ayudar a este tipo de jóvenes y se logró bachillerar.

<sup>3</sup> This and the following texts in English are my translations of transcribed interviews. I was present at Lupe’s. “Todos los maestros y la directora siempre nos trataron por igual.”

<sup>4</sup> Nohemi: “Mi mentalidad a pesar de la edad que tengo [es que] yo no me quedo atrás, ahorita estoy estudiando inglés en Rivas, me dieron una beca, y pues además del inglés vamos a ver que más sale.”

<sup>5</sup> Marlene. I was present: “Enriquecí mucho mi vocabulario con las personas, porque en el instituto tuve maestras que me ayudaron a romper una barrera que era la timidez y ellas siempre me mandaban a hacer discursos y así fui rompiendo el hielo, y ahora no me da miedo hablar.” Jordan, once a cane cutter, now a construction foreman who is first in his class every year and wants to become an architect, said almost the same thing. Both are them appear on the YouTube video.



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