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VICS – Celebrating 45 Years

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At Work in South Sudan



Margaretha and Arie Smits in Wau

In 2008 we were asked by Fr Richard D'Souza SJ to come to Wau, Southern Sudan, to plan Loyola High School there. The Jesuits had built a high school in Wau before the civil war. In fact, we were told that the soldiers camped in the classrooms and priests'

quarters during that time. It is built on the highest point in this town.

Having been in western Tanzania with VICS for 3 years, we were forewarned what an African town will look like; indeed, most of the town is unplanned – mud huts covered with straw roofs. There is a big beautifully executed church, built in the late '50s, a clinic and nursing school, run by Sisters, and a UN military base. The Don Bosco order runs a vocational school for boys. Other buildings, though well built, such as a medical school, minor and major seminaries have fallen into disrepair.

It is very clear that Wau was once a prosperous town. Warning signs of landmines are near the main road. Unexploded ordinance is still around and small bullets explode in the hot sun at times.

Teaching and surveying

We were in Wau for 2 months during which time Margaretha taught a communication course to the budding nurses. This was a difficult task as even simple communication, i.e. getting something across and understood, is a weak concept. On Sundays Fr Richard took us to the surrounding tiny mud churches. The exuberance of the Mass services was something to behold.

Arie started with surveying the boundaries of the large property: no small task as very few knew the four corner points. But with the help of some villagers who were part of the original survey team of long ago, we found some evidence of these

points. Also, amazingly, in a storage shed near the priests' quarters, we found a survey instrument still intact and not taken by the soldiers during the 20-years civil war. Flags were mounted on long bamboo sticks so they could be seen from a central survey point on the hill near the centre of the property. Measuring with a 25-metre tape and reading the many angles on the survey instrument gave us a fairly accurate survey with the help of Fr Dick Cherry SJ, a math teacher who used logarithm calculations and was amazed how accurate the survey was with differences of less than a metre.

Then during four meetings with the school staff and the Jesuits, a proper program was established out of which was born a new plan for the extended school of 800 students, including 24 classrooms, an administration building, an assembly hall, library, auditorium, science labs and computer room. Much to our pride the plan was lodged with the Jesuits in Rome.

Shortage of craftsmen

To plan the school is one thing, to implement it is quite another. There were hardly any craftsmen left in South Sudan, such as carpenters, stonemasons, bricklayers, etc. Most were killed during the civil war – in total contrast to our place in Tanzania with VICS, where there had been lots of readily available craftsmen.

Completion of the future school is still a long way off, but a start with another 6 classrooms has begun. The rest we have to leave up to the providence of the Lord and those who can help financially. ■



Arie surveys the boundaries for the new school

A Social Justice Educator in Nicaragua

Wow – I have been living and working in Nicaragua with Casa Pueblito for almost a year as its Global Education Coordinator. While there is so much to tell, I know many of the feelings I have experienced will be lost in translation from thoughts to paper. I have grown exponentially through this past year: spiritually, intellectually, physically, and emotionally, and I still have at least one more year in Nicaragua. Looking back over one year, there are many stories to tell – each month could fill a book in itself.

At Casa Pueblito, we work with local grassroots community organizations in supporting and funding their yearly community-led development projects. Through the framework of Global Education and social justice solidarity, Casa Pueblito also works with Canadian high schools, universities, church and community groups who send delegations to Nicaragua to volunteer with our community partners on their development projects and participate in social justice education.

I have worked in Global Education with delegations, planning their volunteer work, their itineraries and their budgets, as well as hiring facilitators and planning workshops. When not working on Global Education, I support our development projects, by visiting communities, writing grant proposals, looking over project proposals, budgeting, and more. So far, I have loved this job, the opportunities it offers to visit and work with local communities and facilitate social justice experiences with students.

Getting more and more involved

My first few months here were a mixture of excitement and sadness. I was excited with the new possibilities I saw in front of me: a different country, varied work, and its new culture. However, I felt sad because I would sometimes feel out of place – I didn't fit in, like an awkward sore thumb that didn't know where it might find rest. It was a bit hard at first finding



Juan Carlos with a Canadian high school delegation in Nicaragua

my way here, but I would constantly meet new friends who would accompany me and teach me new things. I started getting involved as I visited a cultural centre and met new friends, and, of course, I got more and more immersed in the work that we do here in Casa Pueblito.

During our delegation season, things started coming together much more smoothly. One of my best friends came to Nicaragua to visit me for a few months, and helped me a lot with the Global Education delegations. Working with volunteers was greatly rewarding, I loved teaching about solidarity and social justice, and being part of a great team of Canadians and Nicaraguans. At Casa Pueblito, we saw community partners working on and completing their community development projects, such as building a high school classroom and latrines, planting organic agricultural gardens, and administering a music and dance program. Apart from working at Casa, my friend and I visited many cities and places in Nicaragua, such as Leon, Ometepe Islands, Corn Islands, and Masaya. We got to know the country quite well and I started to feel a bit more at home.

Time-out to visit El Salvador

After the last delegation left, and my friend had gone back to Canada, I had some time to visit El Salvador, where my

mother and father are originally from, and where my extended family lives. There I visited my old friends in a community I had volunteered in five years ago. I also had a chance to visit Canada for my sister's wedding, which was a fantastic, unforgettable experience. Each day after my return I started to feel more and more at home in Nicaragua, like I was in the exact place I was meant to be, and I started to make new friends.

Gradually and then more rapidly I started to really grow spiritually and emotionally. My work feels productive and rewarding, although it is a stressful environment. Things are rough throughout Central America right now. With climate change, a severe drought has hit the region and has affected the agricultural production for the past three years. This in turn is having serious effects on the local communities where we work.

Many of these communities are peasant farmers, and the crops they planted for the year have not grown or produced food because of the lack of water. The communities are devastated, and have been left with no food for themselves or to sell at a market.

Spread of violence

Nicaragua is the second poorest country in the Western hemisphere, and it is noticeable in the everyday realities one sees when walking down a street or through a market. In my neighbouring homeland, El Salvador, violence has become a dangerous pandemic, with gangs stopping all transportation in the countryside to destabilize the country, and the opposition party criticizing the government and inciting public discontent. Honduras and Guatemala are facing the same type of violence, and government corruption has led to mass demonstrations protesting government scandals and calling for the resignations of both presidents in these countries. Meanwhile, in Nicaragua, the population is divided over the construction of the Nicaraguan canal. The next ten years will be a difficult decade for the region.

This region will remain in my heart and soul, and the next few decades in my life will be dedicated to joining in solidarity with movements working towards social justice in Central America. ■

VICS 45

Dan Milne → Sierra Leone 1984-1986

VICS in Action: at Home and Overseas

VICS volunteer Juan Carlos Jimenez serves in Managua, Nicaragua as the Global Education Coordinator at Casa Canadiense-Pueblito Canada. One of his leadership roles involves organizing and facilitating education excursions for secondary school students from the Greater Toronto Area and beyond.

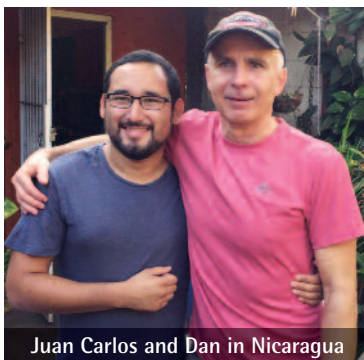
This past March, returned VICS volunteer Dan Milne (Sierra Leone 1984-1986), currently a school social worker at Notre Dame Catholic Secondary School in Brampton, Ontario had the opportunity to join with a group of students and staff in an educational excursion to Nicaragua. This journey was only one part of a yearlong commitment the Notre Dame students and staff made to the Nicaragua Social Justice Club. The Club met once a week for after-school education sessions focused on understanding the history of Nicaragua, global awareness and social justice. In addition, the Club engaged in fundraising efforts to support a local community project and participated in an evening retreat.

Dan has reported that participation in the Social Justice Club and the adventure to Nicaragua was, without a doubt, the most

impactful experience the students had throughout their secondary school years. The focus on "solidarity" through living, working and learning alongside the local community in Nicaragua was made possible as a result of the dedication and commitment of all the staff of Casa Canadiense/Casa Pueblito and the leadership of Juan Carlos.

Dan shared that observing Juan Carlos in his service to different communities in Nicaragua along with the students from his school made him proud to "brag" that he was affiliated with VICS. After the students returned to Notre Dame, Juan Carlos continued to mentor and teach them through social media updates. In a recent blog he posed the following challenge – one that all returned VICS volunteers have faced: "After a few days back into our life in Canada we run the risk of losing track of the big question: Now What?"

Juan Carlos reminded our students: "One of the most important things about solidarity is not necessarily shipping yourself across the globe to visit and volunteer. The biggest challenge for us as solidarity workers is to make profound and structural changes to the societies we live in." ■



Juan Carlos and Dan in Nicaragua

Discerning My Calling

Two years ago today I was sitting in the intense heat of Nicaragua's sprawling capital city, Managua, as part of Casa Canadiense's local team. I was coming to the end of my two-year contract in Nicaragua and was in the midst of preparing to move back to Canada.

I am nostalgic when I think back to this time. With the support of VICS, Fr Bob and Joyce, I was able to spend two amazing years in Nicaragua. Although I was giving of myself and doing meaningful work in the country, I was also receiving so much more from the experience.

Called to Bolivia

After I returned to Canada I worked in Ottawa for a year, only to feel inspired once again to take on another international work experience. This time I was called to Bolivia through the International Youth Internship Program with the Atlantic Council for International Cooperation and Chalice. In Bolivia I worked with women who had migrated with their families from rural areas into the city. It was an intense six months experience and one that helped confirm a few things for me.

While in Bolivia I decided to volunteer at a hospital in Sucre where I worked for two months in the cardiopulmonary



Carolle in Bolivia

ward and felt a strong confirmation that my calling to medicine was true and something that I needed to pursue.

Studying medicine

As I write this, I am preparing to head back to school where I will begin a two-year intensive program studying medicine as a Physician Assistant at the DeGroot School of Medicine

at McMaster University. I am excited about the challenges and new pathways that await me.

My time abroad in Nicaragua and Bolivia was instrumental in helping me discern a greater calling and build a repertoire of skills that will help me to be a caring and well-rounded health care provider.

It becomes all too easy for me to fall into a regular routine in Canada, but during these times I remind myself of what is happening abroad, the people I have met, the friends I have made, and the commonalities we shared.

The work that VICS does is beautiful and instrumental in the lives of so many people. I want to thank everyone from VICS and the supporters who, over the years, have taken part in this beautiful movement. It has touched and changed the lives of all the people involved ... and will continue to do so for years to come. ■



Women in Bolivia

A VICS Experience in Canada

Like many years ago with VICS – we packed our bags and apprehensively but excitedly left our home in Saskatoon for a new adventure 5 hours away in southern Saskatchewan. Beatrice had accepted a contract with the Regional College teaching in the Adult Basic Education program on a First Nations reserve. I accepted a half time contract teaching math.

It was like going back to our VICS Zambian and St. Vincent days – many late nights of school preparation, scurrying to find text books and supplies, trying to help our students deal with the many different life challenges they faced, and really trying to learn about their culture and community. Then as now students range from the mid-twenties to the mid-fifties with many being single moms and dads.

The same all over the world

Our belief that people at heart are the same all over the world has been reinforced once again – our students have hopes and dreams of a better life for their children and for themselves. They understand and experience the conflict between the traditional way of life of their elders and the younger generations trying to promote changes. They view education as “the new buffalo” – something that will provide continued sustenance and help them meet all their needs.

Learning from them

We have much to learn from them and have been very fortunate to meet people on the reserve with knowledge and personal experience of the residential school system and a keen sense of their Treaty 4 history. We have also some dynamic students with a real vision of a brighter future.

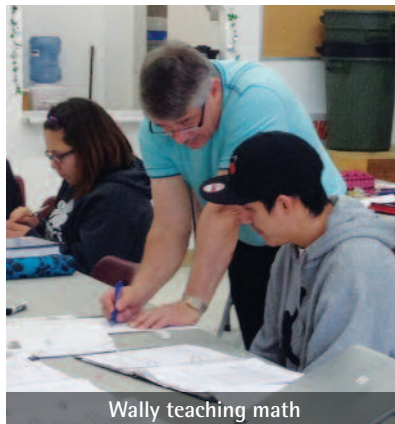


Bea and Wally (back row) with graduates

We have seen the impact that colonization and current government policies and structures have made and continue to make in creating dependency and poverty among the people on the reserve.

We have seen this displayed in many areas of their lives such as lack of good nutrition for themselves and their children, transportation difficulties which can cause attendance problems, poor housing conditions, drugs and alcohol abuse. Their problems are complex and many.

For us in school, adaptability and flexibility is the rule of the day, similar to our other VICS experiences. We try to help them achieve success and build confidence in their ability to succeed in their learning and help them move along the continuum towards being able to dream again of a better tomorrow. Several of our students have gone on to post-secondary courses this past year and this year more of them are making plans to do the same. Though our work keeps us very busy, we are enjoying our experiences and learning more than we can contribute. ■



Wally teaching math

Return to The Gambia

We have returned from Gambia. We noticed a few differences, some good, some not so good. And of course some things stay the same. It was particularly thrilling to go back to St. Peter's Technical High School and see the upgrades.

It was a school of approximately 250 students when we were there – enrolment now is over 2000 students. They have two shifts to accommodate all. In 1984 there was room in the country for only 2500 high school students. Approximately 7000 youngsters came out of Primary School and had to compete for a spot among the 2500 positions by writing an entrance exam as well as having the money for the school fees. Presently all students are eligible for high school – no entrance exam and school fees are either affordable or sponsored.

Student success

While I was an instructor of a course called “Business Methods” some of the students (mostly boys) informed me that by taking this course they could become “business men” and were quite confident about that fact. It was a theory course so I was skeptical. However, one student whom I remember stating that as a fact was a fellow we met on our recent visit ... and he was thrilled to meet me again and tell me that he now has a successful construction company!

Del was able to spend a day with Amadou and saw many of the buildings which he and his crew had built – Del was impressed.



Agnes and Del Rieder are welcomed back to The Gambia by Bishop Michael Cleary (centre)

Meeting returned friends

We were in The Gambia for only two weeks. We met people we'd not expected to meet – some who had been there thirty years ago and had recently returned: Fr Casey, Bishop Bobby Ellison, Paul Webb (former instructor at St. Peter's), Finnbar O'Callaghan, as well as Ed Radwanski and a few others.

When we visited with Bishop Bobby Ellison he was particularly thrilled that we had returned. Thirty years ago he was a young priest and we got to know him. Then a few years back when we'd gone to Europe we found out he was in Rome. We talked with him over the phone but because the Pope was dying he was busy with responsibilities, so it was great to see him in The Gambia. ■



Bob Colburn CSSp, as a VICS volunteer in The Gambia in 1983, helped start St. John's Basic Cycle School for the Deaf. Fr Colburn later served as the Director of VICS.



St. John's School for the Deaf and students today



Grenada – “The Isle of Spice” – 22 Years Later

They say change is continuous, but as I reminisced while visiting the old familiar places of some twenty-two years earlier, the more I felt that things had remained the same – in a good way.

The Cathedral stood tall in its same old place at the top of the hill. The exterior looked the same, although rebuilt and/or renovated after Hurricane Ivan did its damage in September 2004. The inside, however, was completely new. The streets were the same, narrow with houses on both sides only accommodating two lanes of traffic, one lane up and one lane down. The blue-green waters of the carenage had returned with their inviting, welcoming Caribbean warmth. The friendly banter among the people as they greeted each other brought a smile to my face, and a “bon jay” to my lips.

The policeman – a younger, more handsome version – directed traffic from the very same tall booth, raised above the street. Hurricane Ivan had mercifully left it untouched.

Caribbean songs returned to my mind as I effortlessly sang them while soaking in the Caribbean breeze, out on the verandah. I danced along to the upbeat Caribbean music as I walked about the mall; travelled in the local buses; browsed through the streets or heard the, oh-so-familiar, “boom boom” of the music blasting from the vehicles (buses) as they passed by.

Students now grown

My fourteen and fifteen-year-old students were now mothers with teenagers of their own. Lanky students unsure of themselves had metamorphosed into full-grown women with careers and family responsibilities of their own. As they greeted me with the familiar “Miss, Miss”, they confronted me with the changes in my own life – I was older, my hair was beginning to grey, and I was, I hope, a little wiser.

What excited me the most was the welcome improvements to the infrastructure – running water (24 hrs a day), uninterrupted electricity supply, smooth roads (no more huge pot holes), cable television, endless cell phones and landlines. The heat,

however, awful twenty-two years ago, continued to be intolerable. Climate change had taken its toll.

Unshakeable spiritual strength

A strong Catholic and spiritual belief among the Grenadian community had helped to strengthen my own spiritual journey as I participated in the many Catholic community activities such as the Legion of Mary, teaching Sunday School, member of the Catholic Youth Organization (CYO) to name a few. I could feel the presence of the same unshakeable spiritual strength even more alive and stronger, given the adversities the people have faced and continue to face.



A Grenadian police officer directs traffic from a booth raised above the street

I'd heard the word “struggle” used repeatedly while I lived there, to describe how Grenadians were coping with the challenges and external shocks of being fated as dwellers in a developing country. During my September 2015 visit, the same word “struggle” escaped their Grenadian lips – not as a complaint, but as a very honest and open confession of their present economic reality.

As I prepared to take leave of “my home away from home”, I knew that I would miss the friends (old and new), the tastes, the sights and sounds. But I took comfort in knowing that even if I have to wait another twenty-two years to return, the welcoming Grenadian spirit will always make me feel at home. ■