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By Nan McCurdy

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**Reflections on Differences Observed Since
I Last Visited Nicaragua**

By Marilyn Carlisle

[Marilyn Carlisle has been an educator--mostly in early childhood education--since 1978, when she returned from nine

years living in South America. She looked for a way in Baltimore to help people in Argentina who were suffering during the state-sponsored terrorism from 1976 - 1983. The closest thing she found was Central America, which morphed into simply--and happily—Nicaragua.]



Visiting delegation meets with Limay mayor and the president of Casa Baltimore Limay's counterpart board. L to R: Magda Lanuza, Barbara Larcom, Mayor Flora Mendoza, Marilyn Carlisle, Fundeproinso president Norlan Vanegas.

Having had monthly conversations over many years with our Casa Baltimore-Limay friendship committee in Limay - our “sister” city - I had learned that many highways had been completed. I knew the pride in people’s expressions as the important bridges on those highways were also finished. Reducing our travel time was certainly an advantage, getting us to Limay in late afternoon without leaving Managua terribly early and with time for lunch in Estelí.



Marilyn Carlisle visits with Tranquilino Garmendia, who since 1985 has been a leader in Casa Baltimore Limay's counterpart committee and board. He is a former Delegate of the Word in the theology of liberation tradition. Three of his sons were kidnapped and killed by the Contra during the 1980s.

We were able to renew acquaintances with folks we've worked with for 37 years—and who are not young anymore, of course. While that was very rewarding, it was not the goal of our delegation of two people. The improved health system, including more services at the local hospital, the free education including school lunches, and the relative ease with which people in need can get loans or grants have all made a difference in the lives of the people in the small villages surrounding Limay.

The day care center, faithfully supported by Baltimore donors, but now functioning largely with government support, was another high point.

All the streets of Limay are now paved, eliminating our wet and muddy experiences of walking from here to there in previous visits. I also noticed that only once or twice in a week did someone ask if we would give them some money; our appearance surely made us stand out

as visitors from another place, but we did not have the experiences we've had in the past in this regard.



Leonardo Silva, veterinarian and agronomist, provides the leadership for Casa Baltimore Limay's agroecology projects. These include family patio gardens and poultry, fruit trees, beekeeping, soil improvement and conservation, energy-efficient ovens, and wells and water storage. (All photos by Barbara Larcom)

As rich as my experience was in San Juan de Limay, I am most grateful for the opportunity we had to meet with cabinet-level government ministers in Managua. We learned the ways in which the government in the past 15 years has been able to improve health, education, infrastructure, and the economy. From the Finance Minister we learned that the Central American Bank for Economic Integration, established by the Alliance for Progress some 60 years ago, is pleased with the fact that Nicaragua has a project completion rate of 95-97% for its projects; therefore, the Bank is willing to continue extending loans for many new projects. In fact, the World Bank, IMF, Moody's and Standard and Poor's all recognize the improvements in the economy since 2007 when the Sandinistas were returned to the government.

The GDP rose from US\$6.5 billion in 2006 to US\$14 billion in 2021, with at least a 3.5% increase expected in 2022. Nicaragua is 90% self-sufficient in food, exporting

beans and beef, and producing the amount of corn and other basic foods the population eats. It is still importing rice, but importation is down from 4.5 million *quintales* (100-weight) in 2006 to 1 million today. Exports have increased each year, as has public spending. Tourism has been very important to the economy, but of course it diminished after the failed coup attempt of 2018 and during COVID.

The Health Minister instructed us about infant and maternal mortality, the former down from 29/1000 in 2006 to 12.5/1000 in 2021, and the latter down from about 93/100,000 in 2006 to 31.6/100,000 now. Ninety-three percent of the population has received one dose of COVID vaccine and 87% are fully vaccinated (two-year-olds and older). Under Liberal administrations from 1990 to 2006, families paid about 50% of their health care costs. Now, unless they choose private hospitals, they pay nothing.

There are many more facts and statistics to be shared, but I have always enjoyed visiting the safest country in Central America and the 7th safest in Latin America.

The optimism and joy we encountered among the people cannot be denied.