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## News Article

### Dreams of education in Nicaragua

By Morgan Smith  
Special to El Paso Inc.



GRANADA, Nicaragua – “If you have a dream, you have to fight for it,” Margarita says. We’re in Granada, Nicaragua, and Margarita, 20, is a university student.

That’s thanks to a scholarship from Empowerment International, an educational program in Nicaragua founded by Kathy Adams from Lyons, Colo.

The program’s goal is to help young Nicaraguans from two poor barrios get into school. This may mean something as basic as finding them shoes. Then Adams and her small Nicaraguan staff

monitor those students in order to keep them from dropping out.

Margarita was one of EI’s first students. Her father died of cancer three years ago and her mother works as a cook in a local hotel. Her older brother, Lenin, has a son also named Lenin and works at odd jobs. Elvis, her younger brother, failed the seventh grade three times. But now he is an honors student and plans to be a tour guide when he graduates.

Thanks to EI, this sister and brother are on a path to potential success that was never been possible for her family.

“I plan to be a psychologist,” Margarita says. “I want to help kids with handicaps. That’s something I have wanted to do all my life.”

When she graduates in a few months, she hopes to work in a hospital or with Los Pipitos, a children’s program.

#### **Work, no school**

Nicaragua is the second poorest country in the region, after Haiti. Roughly half the population survives on a dollar a day or less. As a result, there is tremendous pressure on young people to drop out of school and find work, even if it’s only selling trinkets on the street.

When the school year started in mid February, 1.3-million children enrolled, but the Ministry of Education had expected 1.8 million.

Where are those other 500,000 potential students? Are they and their families just giving up on the educational process?

One problem is that education in Nicaragua receives even less support than in neighboring countries, like Honduras, that is almost as poor.

Teachers make about \$150 per month, often have little education themselves, receive no training, and work in classrooms where there are virtually no supplies other than what is donated by outside organizations.

Nonetheless, the enthusiasm among Kathy Adams' EI students is extraordinary.

Yosara, 13, wants to manage a company in the private sector. She has three brothers and sisters and her mother is a house cleaner. Her older brother, Melky, is studying to be an aircraft mechanic and wears a t-shirt with a helicopter on it.

### **Enthusiasm**

In February, a fellow photographer and I took them and two of their friends to a local market to practice with cameras that have been donated to EI. It amazed me how quickly their photographs improved.

Julissa, 9, lives in the same barrio with her 7-year-old sister, Liriam, her mother and sometimes her father. When I first met her in 2009, she pulled out a schoolbook and began to read with astounding speed and clarity. Could an American 7-year-old with all our relative privileges read like this, I wondered?

This year, when we stopped at her house again – a shack with dirt floors – she proudly read to us again.

Angelo says that he is interested in architecture but that there are no jobs, so he is studying to be a pharmacist. His mother is a street vendor, selling clothing and his father has irregular work as a night watchman, for people who are out of town, mostly foreigners.

This enthusiasm for learning is a unique resource for Nicaragua. After all, it is the talent, creativity, energy and hard work of a country's work force that leads to greatness. But what will happen here where there are basically three economic generators?

The first is an export industry – beef, rum, coffee, tobacco and sugar – dominated by a few wealthy, family-owned companies, as well as t-shirts and cheap clothing produced by Taiwanese and Korean maquila plants.

The second is remittances, mostly from the United States, that amounted to more than \$800 million in 2010.

And thirdly, there is foreign aid. Unfortunately, several longtime donor countries like Finland, Sweden and now Denmark are terminating their aid because of corruption in the Nicaraguan government. This will cut back on the programs available to help these young students.

### **Opportunities**

Looking at these revenue generators, there is little available for bright young people like Margarita, Elvis, Yosara, Melky and Angelo. They are talented and enthusiastic and have focused their training on areas where there is potential for work.

But what they and younger students like Julissa all face is a global problem: the frustration of working hard to achieve a degree and then the realization that your country has done little to generate employment opportunities for you.

Look at Tunisia and Egypt, and how that frustration can boil over. “Educated youth have been in the vanguard of rebellions against authority certainly since the French Revolution, and in some cases even earlier,” said Jack A. Goldstone with George Mason University’s School of Public Policy in a recent Business Week article.

Margarita has a dream and she has worked hard to achieve it. Soon, however, reality will set in; she and her colleagues will all need employment that matches their new skills. That’s a challenge that the increasingly autocratic Nicaraguan government may not be able to meet.

And sometimes, the young people who are so committed to getting an education are harassed and encouraged to drop out of school.

But the community is responding. One particularly bothersome young man, who sniffed glue rather than go to school, was recently run out of town by local parents.

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