

THE JULIAN CLAXTON PRESENTATION TO NDPS 5 JANUARY 2021

By Martin Claxton, an NDPS member

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The Julian Claxton charity

By Martin Claxton, NDPS

I enjoyed watching the recent photography presentation by Julian Claxton and listening to the background story of his charitable work. I will shortly be sending him a bridge camera that I haven't used for a while and a donation towards the support for an individual child. Julian seems to be a very altruistic person and I could identify with many of his aims, though my own charitable ventures were never as fruitful. My resources were always low, but I tried to help when I could and particularly if it involved me working abroad, such as on trips to Nicaragua and Romania. I heard some of the advice that was being given to Julian by other members of NDPS, who evidently have a great deal of experience in this field, and I hope he is able to continue and develop the project, despite the unrest in Uganda under the repressive Museveni regime.

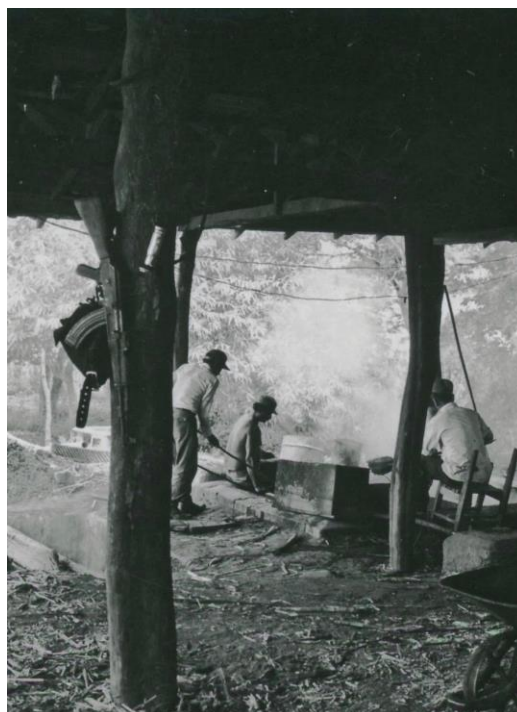
After Julian's presentation, I dug out some of my old photos from my trip to Nicaragua and scanned them over the weekend. I'm sending this selection of photos and commentary to Julian and I thought you might like to have a glance at them as well.

*Best regards,
Martin*

My visit to Nicaragua was in 1986. My photographs from earlier travels around South America in 1978/9 were very poor quality images from a Kodak Instamatic. These photos were taken with a Fujica SLR that I had bought a few months earlier and was still learning how to use. The results were far better but the following images are scans of photographs and therefore are of poorer quality.

The project itself was a European co-operation between groups in the UK, Netherlands, Germany, France and Spain. It's aim was to help provide a safe, clean water supply to an area of Esteli which was still taking in refugees during the 7th year of the civil war. About ¼ million people had been displaced during the fighting and there were dozens of fatalities that summer

alone, from landmines. On the day of our arrival, 4 German volunteers had been killed as a result of a landmine in the local hills. Occasionally, at night, gunfire could be heard in the distance, though Esteli itself was regarded as safe. On the occasions when we went out into the countryside, we noticed that firearms were usually kept close to hand, as at this sugar cane plantation.



Life in rural Nicaragua can be very hard and for many decades there have been numerous, unexplained deaths amongst young men working at the plantations. In 2013, an American photographer, Ed Kashi, visited the region to document the plight of the cane cutters. He was unprepared for the reality he found: "A funeral, literally every day, for a sugar cane worker who had died of this kidney disease." He returned to Nicaragua and other regions, to cover the epidemic and scientists' responses to it. Unlike chronic kidney disease, which is mostly seen among elderly people in urban areas, chronic kidney disease of unknown origin (CKDu) is believed to kill roughly 40,000 people a year, primarily from marginalised agricultural communities living along the equator. Baffled by the ubiquity and intensity of

CKDu in Nicaragua, researchers at first questioned whether the deaths could be put down to diet, toxins or dehydration, allowing sugar companies to deny any potential causal link between the disease and working conditions on the plantations. Now the science is underlining a clearer connection between heavy labour in high temperatures and incidence of CKDu. Research has shown that basic workplace improvements, such as regular access to water, rest and shade, can significantly decrease potential kidney injury among labourers.

Another aspect of rural agriculture is cattle farming. With there being widespread shortages for vehicle spare parts, the tradition of riding horses remained strong. I was very surprised a few years later to find out that one of my former college friends was working on a cattle ranch in Nicaragua during the time I was over there. I had been given a lift from Norwich, up to Sheffield, to attend a meeting about the work in Nicaragua. Whilst chatting to my driver, we realised that we shared a common history of living in the same area of London. When I mentioned where I had studied, we were both shocked to realise that his (ex) wife had been on the same course. I remembered her well and occasionally sat with her in lectures. She left the course after just 2 terms, presumably to study agriculture or animal welfare because she became involved in cattle husbandry. Though our paths hadn't crossed in Nicaragua, I did briefly meet her again in Norwich - it's a small world!

Horses were still a common means of getting about in rural areas.



Esteli is now classed as a city, though it was more like a small town in 1986.



We were based in a rural barrio on the outskirts.



Shanty buildings were still springing up with each influx of new refugees.



The small river had previously been a major source of water supply.

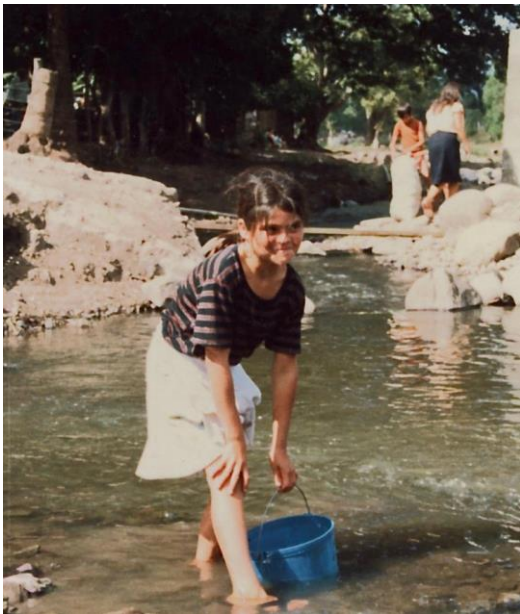


Apart from slaking the thirst of cattle and horses, it provided water for drinking, washing

and laundry. Somewhere amongst my negatives is a picture of a lorry being washed down in the river.



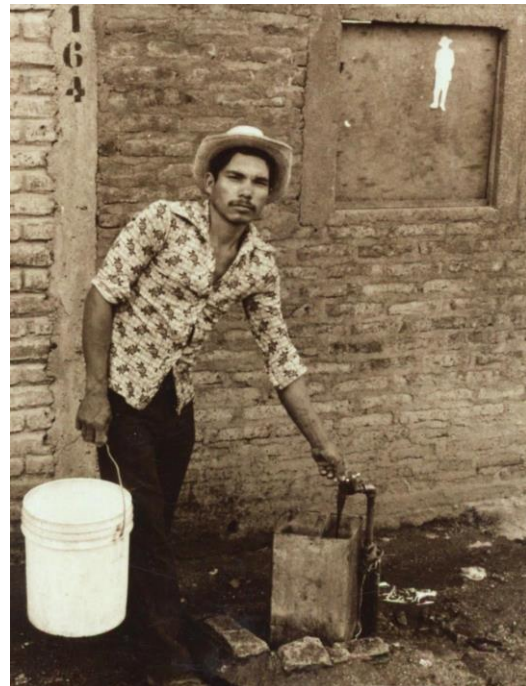
The children helped out at a very early age.



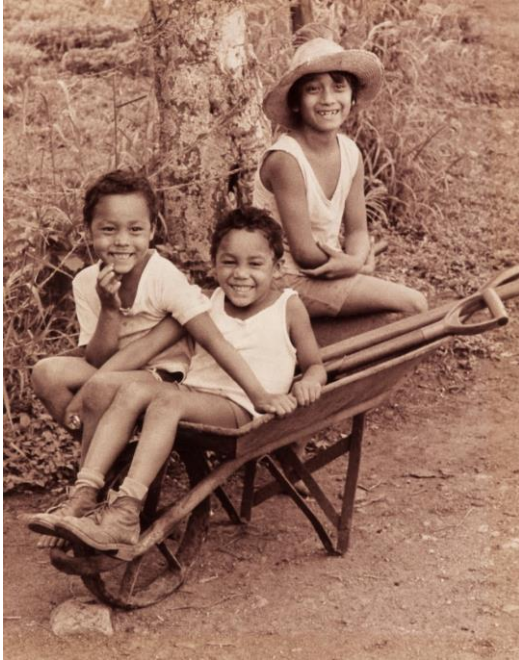
There were a few standpipes in the barrio, but these were widely spread. Our intention, in the short term, was to provide standpipes for every couple of houses, until resources were available for properties to have their own plumbing. Until then everyone had the arduous task of collecting water every day. I still feel very frustrated whenever I see water being wasted.



I took this photo because it included an outline of Augusto Sandino, the leader of a rebellion (1927 - 1933) against the United States occupation of Nicaragua.



Despite their hardships, the children were always friendly and smiling. Initially, they would sometimes ask for pens/pencils. Occasionally, I would hand a few out but we had been warned not to give too many, as they were often sold rather than used. We had brought quite a bit of stationery over with us for the local school.



The barrio was very basic but it was a friendly place.



The local garbage team were out that day, to clear the streets and drains.



This was my home for 6 weeks. I was lucky that the house included a small shop and the family also had a lorry. A pre-arranged payment was given to each family that hosted a volunteer. There was no running water of course and the toilet was a hole on a raised platform, within the chicken compound - a great place to visit in the middle of the night!



Meet the family...

Their shop. The frisbee was a gift that I had brought with me, to give to the children, and it proved to be very popular.



The storage area behind the house.



The food was basic but nourishing - not much meat but lots of huevos...and tortillas.



Digging out the trenches. We worked alongside the locals, though they put us to shame. They were used to hard work and the climate. Even a guy in his 70s was doing better than us weak gringos.



As the French girls discovered, some of the stones needing to be moved were pretty big! I didn't do too badly, despite having fractured a rib.



I was on the top of a ladder, putting some of the roof timbers in place. Unfortunately, the guy meant to be footing my ladder was a little tardy from his tea break. Fortunately, the ladder didn't twist before landing on the concrete, allowing it to break my fall. Being hand-made, the ladder had some spring in it but the whole of my chest was a mass of bruises - purples, greens, yellow, etc. for quite a few days. Thereafter, working with the pick-axe wasn't much fun but the shovelling helped to keep the fracture mobile until it healed.

The finished bodega was to be used as a community facility, once it was no longer needed to store tools and pipes.

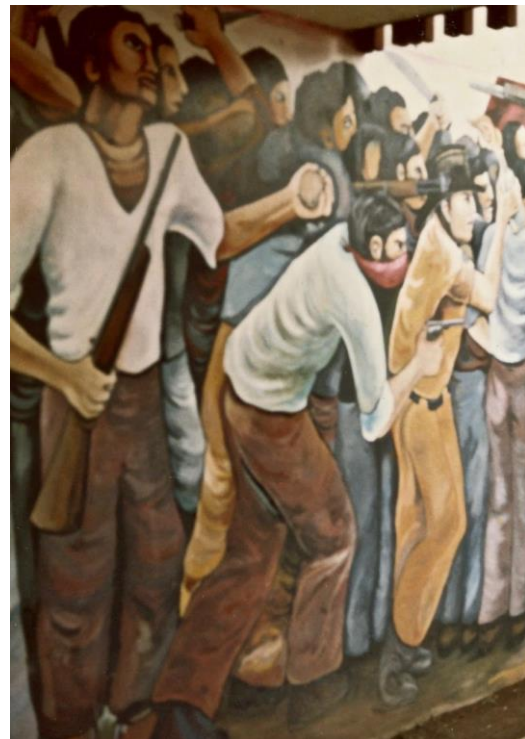
A few years earlier, I had been learning how to hand-make some leather goods, such as belts and bags. With many saddlers around, it was interesting to watch them at work, skiving a piece of leather - shaving the edges thinner to allow an overlap of two pieces before stitching them together. I had a pair of sandals made to measure. They were very comfortable and I still have them somewhere in the bottom of my wardrobe.

Having a cut-throat shave looked a little risky but the result was surprisingly smooth.

The next customer looked a little young for a shave!



Given Nicaragua's history of wars, it's not surprising that there was quite a bit of 'revolutionary art' around



...even in the schools.



Whilst in Esteli, we were invited to many places, including schools, the hospital and even the prison. As the civil war was drawing to a close, education standards were improving dramatically and there were large numbers of medical staff being trained.



New housing was being built. The abstract figure is a copy of the city's symbol, an ancient petroglyph that can be seen on a rock in the main square. Rock carvings seem to be in the local blood; in recent years; elaborate, large, stone carvings made by a hermit, Alberto Gutiérrez, can be seen at a remote, hilly location outside of Esteli.



Sadly, the idealistic vision of a peaceful and prosperous future for all of Nicaragua's population, remains a dream for most of its people. The civil war eventually resulted in the Sandinistas, under Daniel Ortega, deposing the dictator, Somoza - coincidentally, this happened around the same time as the uprisings which toppled Idi Amin and Obote, allowing Museveni to become president of Uganda. Currently, the ageing Ortega is president once again and he has created an authoritarian regime that is nearly as fraudulent and brutal as the one under Somoza. So many leaders come to power, promising reform, and eventually end up creating their own repressive regimes, to maintain their privileged positions. In the words of Sir John Dalberg-Acton, "Power tends to corrupt, and absolute power corrupts absolutely".

As with most of the Latin-American countries, there is always release through music. The men in this small informal group were just enjoying themselves in the shade of the main square of Esteli.



Before we left, the local people held a farewell party for us. I did my bit of 'dad-dancing' with the mother of the family that I stayed with.



The families that we had lived and worked with, were very appreciative of our efforts and the day before we left, they organised a trip to the Pacific coast. Due to the war, buses were difficult to get hold of but they managed to procure one somehow. Apart from our group, some of their children joined us, many of whom had never seen the sea before. It was a beautiful location that we visited but, frustratingly, I had run out of film by then.

Near to this coastal location is the small town of El Viejo which has a friendship link with Norwich but, sadly, I have never had the opportunity to return to Nicaragua.

