



Wedding Guide 1986

Geneseo grad aids Nicaraguan literacy

By Beatrice Ganley, SSJ

Harvey Wells, educator and curator of the Jinotega Museum, proudly leads us into a small room containing displays about the indigenous history of Jinotega. (A "department" in Nicaragua is the equivalent of one of our states.) "Here there is an opportunity for us to find a little bit of ourselves," he says.

After a cursory look at the exhibits, some of our delegation begin to badger him with questions about Russian and Cuban involvement in his country. His mouth sets in a resigned line as he replies, "In six years since 1979, I've never seen a Russian. I don't know what they look like. Yes, we had Cubans... I will explain. But, please, come in here." And he gestures us to move on into a classroom located off an open courtyard.

He speaks to us in English. A 1958 graduate of SUNY Geneseo, the son of a United States Marine and a Nicaraguan woman, Mr. Wells seems to enjoy the opportunity to use his second language.

His greatest enthusiasm, however, is for talking about his work as an educator. He explains that before 1979, when the Sandinistas came into power, there were only 250 teachers in the department, a number totally insufficient for the needs of the population. In 1979, Wells undertook the direction of the department's educational system, and he is unabashedly proud of his accomplishments. "There are now 900 teachers," he says, "and we could use 500 more."

His goal as a "teacher of teachers," as he describes himself, has been to provide degrees and greater competence for those who have been teaching without adequate preparation. At a recent celebration for conferring degrees, the oldest recipient was 66 years old.

"But you asked about the Russians and Cubans," he says. "In Jinotega, there is a free hospital built by the Russians and staffed by Russian doctors. It is a good hospital. There are also Cuban doctors at this hospital which is mainly a military hospital. But whoever needs care there is served. If anyone needs special care, they go to Russia or Cuba or Czechoslovakia or Hungary."

He further explains that the Cubans came to assist in the literacy program. There were 2,000 of them in Nicaragua, and 60 were in Jinotega teaching basic literacy in "the most difficult of situations." He adds that part of their contract was that they were not to teach politics. "Right now," he continues, "the Cubans have returned to Cuba on account of the criticism we have been getting about foreign and Russian influence."

"What people do not realize," he adds, "is that many countries are assisting us. Canada, Russia and France send free wheat as a gift. We used to buy wheat from the United States, but, since the embargo, we cannot. West Germany gave our country eight printing shops for books on natural science for all the schools in Nicaragua."

We learn that in the elections of '84, for example, Nicaragua was assisted by Finland and Norway. Paper came from Canada and Sweden; books came from Quebec, and 10,000 pencils were sent by the Russians. He describes these elections as "the first free elections I have seen in my life."

Harvey Wells' main work at this time is authoring textbooks and developing curriculum materials. "I feel very happy doing this work," he says. "I do not belong to the Frente Sandinista. I work for the government because it suits me." He describes himself as a very individualistic person, disinclined to align himself with any particular political party. "But," he says, "the revolution is the best thing that has happened to Nicaragua."

"In the past six years, we have made serious mistakes, but we are learning. We want to make this a good country, not for some, but for all Nicaraguans. We have places in school now for everybody. But we still need many more schools, books, and better teachers at all levels."

"What about reports that the FSLN (the Sandinista party) is losing favor?" one of our group asks.

Mr. Well responds, "Those people who were very poor are with the FSLN govern-



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Harvey Wells

ment; those people who were very rich are not."

"And what about communism?" asks another.

"In Jinotega, there are perhaps 50 communists. Here they are not popular. I don't think Nicaragua as a country would like to be communist. I don't think they would ever win elections...conservatives, maybe, yes. We are very few; we are poor. I am quite sure we are not building a communist country. Sandinista, yes. But Sandinista is something different."

He does not think much of the contras who, "happy with their many dollars to spend, come to kill civilians and children." According to him, they do not have much popular support, and would probably be defeated if they entered the political process as a legitimate party.

He speaks sadly of one woman, Ilda Montenegro, a teacher in his department, who was kidnapped by the contras and taken to a camp in Honduras, where she is now forced to serve as group mistress for the men. Her four-year-old child lives in Jinotega. I am struck by the matter-of-fact manner with which he relates this example of "the risk inherent in being a teacher these days."

I also recall our interview with some journalists who had come from Germany on a fact-finding tour for the evangelical churches there. In Honduras, they spent some time at a rest and recreation camp for the contras and were amazed to notice that there were apparently two different populations in the camp. The fighting men, they said, were strong, good-looking, muscular and very healthy. The civilian population, consisting of women, children and older people described as refugees from Nicaragua, appeared malnourished, although they had been in the camp for some time. Again and again, they mentioned in disbelief the bloated bellies of the children and the contrast between the one group and the other. "Was Ilda Montenegro one of those women?" I wonder.

As we prepare to leave, Harvey Wells gives us phone numbers and addresses of some of his relatives in the United States, hoping we will contact them upon our return. He speaks of his love of our music, and of his memories of the art galleries in Washington D.C. Responding to our question as to how he has been influenced by his stay in our country, he smiles and says, "Well, I fell in love in the United States. My attitude as a teacher, I received there, and I love the English language. To be able to communicate with you in your own language is a great pleasure to me."

Knights of Columbus plan bowling tourney for disabled

Fourth Degree members of the Knights of Columbus of the Fifth New York District will present their second annual Physically Handicapped/Wheelchair Bowling Tournament on Saturday, June 14, at Maiden Lanes in Greece. The tournament is being conducted for

physically disabled and wheelchair-confined men and women, 18 years of age or older, and will be made up of three divisions. Applications may be obtained by contacting co-chairman Robert Hafner at (716) 671-3833 or Gerry Newmann at 265-3883.

Two Aquinas seniors named

Aquinas seniors Paul Mancarella and Ellen Mayer have been named recipients of the Army Reserve Award, which acknowledges excellence in academic work and athletics.

Mancarella is the son of Mr. and Mrs. Joseph Mancarella of Clay Avenue. Mayer is the daughter of Mrs. Joyce Mayer of Royal Oak Drive, Gates.

Mayer is also the recipient of the Female Athlete of the Year Award.

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