

## **With support from Grace Lutheran Church in Grafton, Meg Boren has given 10 years of her own life to transforming the lives of poverty-stricken Nicaraguans**

Ten years ago, Meg Boren of Grafton packed a tent and everything she owned into two large bags and headed to Aposentillo, Nicaragua, to start her mission, Circle of Empowerment, with the help of Grace Lutheran Church in Grafton.

Today, she is in the process of turning the mission over to the people to whom she has given so much, but who have given her even more, Boren said.

She will be in Grafton with her family and friends for almost four months this year, instead of her usual two months, and calls mission leaders only once every two weeks.

“It’s part of the process of turning the power over to them,” Boren said. “If something needs attention, they can’t wait four months. Before, they would wait for me to come back. I have really good people there. I have to let them make errors, or not, and figure out what to do.”



“That’s always been our intention. Handouts do not work. They do not empower people. Our whole thing is empowerment. We involve them to solve the problem.”

Grace Lutheran Church provides about half of the mission’s \$40,000 annual budget.

When Boren started Circle of Empowerment, only five students in the village were going to high school, which was an hour away by bus, and almost all adults were illiterate.

Today, there are 170 elementary and high-school students, seven university students and 75 teachers, who teach in local public schools built by the mission.

“We graduated our first doctor, first RN and first CPA,” said Boren, who is a nurse.

In 2005, Boren drove a school bus donated by Johnson Bus Co. in Port Washington and filled

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with donated supplies to Nicaragua, where it was confiscated at the border but later returned. That bus died and has been replaced with two buses — one that takes children to their schools and one that takes teachers to the schools, resulting in more education time for students.

All students come to Boren's house Saturday mornings for additional tutoring.

Children and adults are healthier due to a medical clinic the mission helped build and the training of 18 local health workers. There are two health workers, known as brigadistas, in each of the nine villages the mission now serves.

Boren equates them to emergency medical technicians. The women start IVs, perform CPR, suture small wounds, provide other medical care and teach people about various health issues.

"Every month we do an inservice on a topic, such as using a blood pressure cuff, meningitis or prenatal care," said Boren, who does most of the training.

"We see the results in the death rate going down. In addition, the census at the clinic has gone down because people are taking responsibility for their own care. We teach them how to care for themselves."

Most Nicaraguan women have low social status, but because of the education they have received through the mission, several women are leaders in their communities and one is president of her village.

A national woman's rights law was recently passed in an effort to reduce sexual abuse and domestic violence. In her village, that is taken seriously, Boren said.

Boren also started a work cooperative where villagers, mostly women, make items to sell to tourists.

Another issue is the inability of local people to get affordable loans to purchase the land they work. The banks own the land and charge 40% interest. If they miss a payment, the bank takes the land, Boren said.

"That happened to the father of a girl, who is getting her CPA this year. He defaulted on a loan so they were going to take six acres of oceanfront property for \$500," Boren said. "He kept it because I helped, but I can't do that for everybody."

She would like to start an affordable loan program for people to buy land.

"Health and education is our main mission, but we work an awful lot in fighting injustice," she said.

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Boren, who worked at Columbia St. Mary's Hospital Ozaukee, went to Nicaragua for the first time in 1999 to be a nurse for one year at a Lutheran mission.

She sold her house before she left. Her children were in graduate schools and on their own missions. Her daughter was in Alaska working on alcohol and other drug abuse issues and her son was in Israel working in a Palestinian refugee camp.

"I was taking a year out of my life to figure things out, and I didn't want to be worrying about a house here," she said.

After the year was up, the leaders in the community asked her to stay.

Boren first went to Chicago, where she worked with an emergency medical transport team. After discussions with her children, she decided to return to Nicaragua.

"They were worried about my safety and wanted me to live in town and drive to the villages," Boren said.

"I prayed on it and decided I had to live with the people. So I lived in a 10-by-10-foot tent on the beach. I ended up on the beach for 10-1/2 months, including a rainy season.

"It was a way that I bonded with the community quickly. They knew I was either very sincere and dedicated or nuts."

Although the Nicaraguan people are poor and live in houses with dirt floors and no running water, they have a joyful faith that inspires Boren.

"They see everything as a gift from God," she said. "They will sell their last cow to take care of their mother-in-law's brother. If they butcher a pig, they share it with their neighbors. They will give you literally what they have."

Boren built a beach house on two acres along the Pacific Ocean, which she uses as a retreat center, preschool and lodging for medical teams and others on mission trips. That includes physical therapy students from Concordia University Wisconsin in Mequon who work with disabled children and their families.

This is the fourth year an internship at the mission has been part of the students' training. Students bring therapy equipment with them or improvise.

"We now have parallel bars for kids to walk and equipment for standing and exercising. The students show parents what they can do to help their children," Boren said.

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“Four years ago, they started working with five kids who were told they would never walk. They’re all walking, and one is playing soccer.”

In October, a 3-year-old girl with severe scoliosis will go to Shriners Hospitals for Children in St. Louis for the first of five surgeries to straighten her spine.

“Without the operation, she won’t live to be 6,” Boren said. “I have a donor that will help us with expenses.

“I have been so blessed with a network of resources. If they know their money is going to something that’s really producing some good, people are very generous.”

Although she’s stepping back, that doesn’t mean Boren’s mission is finished and she’s moving back to Grafton.

Her oceanfront house and Nicaraguan village are still her home, a paradise she tries to make even better.

“I will probably be going down there until I don’t know where I am any more,” Boren said.

“After 10 years, I don’t feel at all burned out. It’s been a fantastic experience. With humanitarian work, you often go with the focus on what you can give and come away with how much you have been given.

“What I don’t have in financial security, I have in the love of 6,000 people.”

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Image Information: Meg Boren (front) is supported in her mission by Grace Lutheran Church members, including (first row) the Rev. Heidi Borkenhagen, (second row) Jim and Linda Scott, (third row) Joan Tuttle, Joyce Radtke, Kathy Kehoe, Diane Kiesow, (back row) Linda Olson, Korey Gierach and Scott and Debbie Donovan holding granddaughter Rachel. Photo by Sam Arendt

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