

Mike Cobb's Nicaragua's Update - February 2007

Dear Family and Friends,

Thanks for your continued interest in our lives and what is happening with us here in Nicaragua. The newsletter was getting too long, so this will be the first installment of “Gringo Life”, a section of stories about living here, separate from the newsletter. These updates are as much for me as for anyone, so you'll see my ponderings and analysis about some of the cross-cultural events and attitudes we encounter on a regular basis.

It was a busy Fall for the Cobb family. In October we went to the States for a week where the girls enjoyed the fine Western Maryland autumn weather, the changing leaves, and playing in a pumpkin patch and corn maze. Seeing the leaves change color is something we all miss when we are down here.

While in the U.S., Carol and the girls collected shoes from friends and brought them back for some children who live outside Managua. It is a great activity for them because knowing the situation of the less fortunate, which the girls do, is a precursor to caring about them. Shoes for kids here are critically important because without them, children may not attend school. Additionally, a host of parasites are transmitted through the feet. Simple things like footwear make a huge difference in the life of a child, and our girls really enjoy helping out and playing with the kids here in Nicaragua.

To see the complete Gallery [click here](#)



Making sure the girls get a good sense of what it means to be an American is something we care about deeply about. Even the manner in which we raise the girls here preserves as much of the American lifestyle as we can. Just the fact that Carol brings up the girls and cooks for them is a really good dose of American values and norms. Our diet is still a largely U.S.-style diet of meats, pastas, and veggies like succotash, broccoli, corn, and beans. If we had a maid cooking, we'd certainly be eating differently, with lots of gallo pinto (typical Nica dish of rice and beans) and other traditional staples.

In fact, a few weeks ago the gate keeper in our neighborhood ask Carol for some gallo pinto one evening because his family had not brought him any food that day. As hard as it is for us to imagine being left with no food all day, it was probably harder for him to understand that we

didn't have any gallo pinto. That was inconceivable in his world. Everyone has gallo pinto ready all the time. We don't. We did, however, have chicken and we sent that right over.

One thing we do know is that our girls are going to be caught in the middle of two cultures. This has pluses and minuses. There is a book that circulates in the expat and missionary communities called 3rd Culture Kids, and it describes what happens when children grow up in a mix of cultures. Our daughters will not be typical Americans, even with the trips back to the states, U.S.-style cooking, and parental indoctrination of things American. They are not Nicaraguan, but will have a lot of the values and cultural characteristics found in Nicaraguans. For example, Amanda included a rooster crowing in the early morning in her Christmas story this year. I doubt many kids in the U.S. have ever been awakened by a rooster crowing. I'm sure that in the end, the girls will be a lot more American than Nicaraguan, but the reality is that they won't fit the standard mold in either country.

The book goes on to talk about the pros and cons of raising children multi-culturally, some of which are obvious. They will be bilingual, have a sensitivity to other ways of doing things, and an international outlook on life. All great things in a world that is rapidly globalizing. But what will they not know? Lots of things, as we are finding out bit by bit. Amanda had no idea of how to go to a mailbox and mail a letter. Carol and I were both surprised, but it occurred to us that she has never had to use one before, so it makes sense.

Some things are easy to identify and teach, like the names of the U.S. coins, the Pledge of Allegiance, the National Anthem, and other basic U.S. history. These are things we know they don't know, and that we expected to have to teach them. But how about the things more subtle, like Columbus Day, Presidents Day, and Thanksgiving stories and activities in school? There is also the content in the U.S. primary reading books that is absorbed as children learn to read. These are the things hidden between the lines that become part of the cultural subconscious, things that the girls aren't necessarily picking up here in Nicaragua.

So it begs the question for Carol and me: What will be the big shapers of our girls? It's hard to know, but seeing extreme poverty and wealth living side by side will be something powerful, for good and/or for bad. Having maids and servants and growing up in a class society is very different from our experience as kids. The U.S. is incredibly egalitarian, especially when viewed from the context of a class society. Even with Carol and me imposing our egalitarian attitudes, our girls will have a different take on things because their peers will be large influencers, and they are in most cases products of the Nicaraguan culture.

This may not be all bad. For example, it is difficult for Carol and me to have a person in our house and not treat them like a guest. We were brought up that way. It is probably the reason we don't have a live-in maid and never will. It would be uncomfortable for us to be in the main house with all the comforts and have a maid in her 8x10 room, basically excluded from the main house for purposes other than work. The reality is however, that for many maids, the 8x10 room is far nicer than what they have at home, and it is really appreciated. Amanda and Emily may be able to have live-in help and offer a better life for a maid, whereas Carol and I can't. I don't know. Just things I think about from time to time. Living in a foreign country is just that, foreign.

On the home front, Amanda has been taking piano lessons and is having fun with that. Dad has taught her a song or two, using his best one-fingered technique, including “Planet Claire” from the B-52’s. Not sure this is what the teacher has in mind. Despite dad’s interference, Amanda is getting pretty good and enjoys playing.

Emily is gearing up for pre-school at the German School which she will start in just 2 weeks. We are told that the kids who start at 2-3 years old really pick up the German fast. Makes sense having seen how quickly Amanda learned Spanish when we moved here. Emily is excited about school and asks every day if school is today. It’s hard to explain the “distant” future to a 2 year old.

Halloween is a custom that made it here with the return of the many Nicaraguans who lived in the States for a decade or more. However, it has some interesting elements not found in the U.S. Trick-or-treating is only found in one neighborhood that I know of, and even there only about 20 houses participate. It is a free-for-all of kids in costume and hoards of poor children out trying to get the same stash. Some parents regulate the give-away and only give treats to the kids who are dressed up. One mom knows the kids and remembered that some of the kids with painted faces were the same kids she turned away last year. In the houses where it is unregulated, there is a huge mass and crush of kids at the front door. Not quite the same thing as trick-or-treat in the US, but it is a lot of fun.

Other activities since the last update include Mandy’s graduation from kindergarten at the German School. Now this is an activity exclusively intended for parents and grandparents (and siblings dragged to the event by parents). It is very cute to see the kids in their graduation caps proceed for their “diplomas” and then offer the usual Christmas performances complete with Christmas carols sung in German. Yes, they were Christmas performances complete with Nativity scenes, wise men and Baby Jesus. Santa wasn’t invited for the performance, although he did make an appearance at the party following graduation activities.

Carol, while sometimes feeling “out of it” here, actually found out that she’s not the only one out of it. Mandy needed a “mortar board” graduation cap and told Carol this after school. With no idea of how or where to get one, Carol went to the school and ask at the office if she could buy one there. No, they didn’t have them and she should have one made. Our Spanish teacher said she knew a woman in Jinotepe who could do it and we had one made.

Then, about a week before the graduation, another woman called Carol because the school referred her. Carol had another one made, and then, unbelievably, a day before the event, a father called and asked if Carol could have one made for his son. Unfortunately not, but some of the kids did in fact take turns using other kids caps for the stage walk, so everything worked out fine.

One really neat thing at the graduation was to hear one of the school administrators speaking Spanish with a German accent. Some things like that hit you out of the blue as odd and yet refreshing. Not sure why. On another note of accents, I was recognized by my cab driver in Buenos Aires as speaking Spanish like a Central American, which I took as an incredible compliment.

We were back up in Selva Negra again this fall for Rachel's 7th birthday. Rachel lives there on the farm and is home schooled by her mom Vickie and dad Roy. When Rachel isn't studying, she's helping on the farm gathering eggs and making cheese. Part of the festivities was a cow-milking "contest." Carol and Emily eagerly participated (photo included).



Going back to the U.S. for Christmas was a refreshing change for everyone. I know that I especially enjoyed the cool weather. One of the things I miss the most when living in Nicaragua is working outside in the yard and cutting and splitting wood. Both my father and Carol's dad had plenty of wood to cut and split which was an incredible joy for me. There is something extremely therapeutic for me in these activities. Both Amanda and Emily helped out and did a lot of "timber!"-yelling. The girls are also learning to split and stack firewood.

I've got to tell one funny story about Emily. She is two and a half and into the "my" stage, especially with a big sister who reminds her of that word from time to time. Well apparently, she had a stick and was hitting Carol's folks' car with it, and so Dawson, Carol's dad, asked her to stop. Her response? "It's my stick."

Until next time, enjoy a wonderful New Year and keep in touch.

The Cobb Family