For Nicaraguan Relief
by Phyllis Ponvert

As always, when I return to Nicaragua I am acutely aware of the contrasts: breathtakingly beautiful landscapes in a crumbling country, the wealth of her natural resources and the poverty of her people. I keep coming back to visit Nicaraguan friends and family and work with a woman's health project that I've been involved with for eight years.

This past February I spent five weeks in Matagalpa, Nicaragua. I brought $5000 for hurricane relief aid collected from generous friends, and delivered it to the project, the Casa Materna. The money will help pay for clothes, bedding, roofing, food and medicine that they are providing to several small communities damaged by Hurricane Mitch.

I spent several days in the capital, Managua, with a family I met in 1992. We spent time visiting and catching up on family news and playing with their grandchild, four year old Sofia. My last visit to Nicaragua was in 1995. As I walked through Managua, I saw that although the city had not been affected by the hurricane, the gap between rich and poor has grown ever wider. There are new luxury hotels and restaurants, more cars, new shopping malls, McDonald's and Domino's Pizza, all catering to foreign investors and the small middle/upper class who live in houses protected by high walls and armed security guards. But in Maria Elena's neighborhood, only fifteen minutes away, there are no phones; no indoor plumbing and most people still cook with wood.

On the trip north to Matagalpa, our bus had to bypass road damage where hurricane flooding had pulled away parts of the highway and destroyed bridges. Even after three months, in some places the water had not yet receded, and it was a sad sight to see only the tops of submerged trees and houses.

The city of Matagalpa is in the mountains with a delicious, cooler climate. December through March the ripe coffee beans are harvested and the beneficiaries, or processing plants, were busy. Outside in the sun, workers were raking and drying the beans, which will be bagged and sold to exporters.

As I walked through the central square, it was a sad road damage where hurricane flooding had pulled away parts of the highway and destroyed bridges. Even after three months, in some places the water had not yet receded, and it was a sad sight to see only the tops of submerged trees and houses.

The Casa Materna is a house for women with high-risk pregnancies who live in rural mountain communities and must deliver their babies in a hospital. Women can safely wait out their last weeks of pregnancy at the Casa, knowing that when they go into labor, it's only a few minutes drive to the Regional Hospital.

The Casa has a Nicaraguan staff that includes a coordinator, two nurses, a part-time doctor, a midwife, a program director and an office administrator. It is funded entirely by foreign donations from countries that include Spain, US, Japan, UK and Holland. Since its opening in 1991, the Casa has served more than 5000 women. There are always 25-30 women staying at the house, which has five large bedrooms built around a central courtyard, a large kitchen, dining room, living room, clinic, and office.

The women pay nothing, but most families bring food to share: a bag of dried corn or beans, cheese wrapped in banana leaves, oranges, a stack of homemade tortillas, and sometimes a couple live chickens. There is a pleasant, informal atmosphere with the staff and women sharing the household and cooking.

An important part of the Casa’s work is ongoing workshops about maternal and infant health care and family planning. An increasing number of women ask for contraceptive devices and those who’ve had more than four children can have their tubes tied at a local clinic.

The maternal mortality rate in Nicaragua is extremely high. Between 250 and 300 women die per 100,000 births, a striking comparison to the figure of 6-30 women in countries where health care is available. In the countryside, 70% of births take place at home attended by a midwife, but even the best-trained midwife is incapable of dealing with a sudden emergency. With access to a central, adequate health system, the majority of these deaths are preventable. But in many outlying areas, roads fit for vehicles are non-existent. So people must walk or ride a mule for hours to reach someone with health services.

Greed

“Tried thinking bout how to talk about greed
I been thinking bout how to talk about greed
I been wondering if I could sing about greed
Trying to find a way to talk about greed
Greed is a strain of the American dream
Having more than you need is the essential theme,
I can see it in you
You can see it in me
We can see it in big corporations
All throughout the government
See it in the banks
I can see it in the church
See it in the military.
I been thinking bout how to talk about greed
I been thinking bout how to talk about greed
I been wondering if I could sing about greed
Trying to find a way to talk about greed.”

Excerpt from “Greed”, words & music by Bernice Johnson Reagon, founder of Sweet Honey in the Rock.

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The tragedy of Hurricane Mitch has clearly shown the failure of the structural adjustment programs imposed on Nicaragua by both US and international lending agencies like the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund. In order to receive these loans, Nicaragua had to agree to austerity programs that negatively impact its economy and the natural environment. The Nicaraguan government has cut health, education and human services to the bare minimum. Spending on health care dropped from $58/ person in 1989 to $14 in 1997. Nicaragua owes $6 billion in foreign debts. Last year it made payments of $349 million, nearly $1 million/day, representing well over half of the Nicaraguan government’s yearly earnings.

The Casa Materna is a safe haven for mothers and babies, but shortly before the volcanic eruption of the nearby Maderas Volcano, the Casa Materna was forced to evacuate. The Cascadas de Managua, which supplies drinking water to the city, was contaminated by volcanic ash and the city’s water supply was closed for a month. The Casa Materna was forced to close its doors.

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