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In several Nicaraguan villages, children learn to read on old desks from Western New York schools.



BARBARA TUCKER/STAFF

AT PLAY: Two girls in a children's home in Nicaragua pose for a picture. The girl on the left, about 5 years old, had only the top part of a gameboard to play with. Children's toys are high on the list of items needed in these small, poor villages.



BARBARA TUCKER/STAFF

CARING: Ann Marie Zon talks to one of her godchildren, Roger Leonel, at the rectory in Rivas, Nicaragua. Roger's mother works at the rectory.

GOOD WORK

WNY woman finds her life's mission in this poor Central American country

BY BARBARA TUCKER
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Nicaragua, the largest country in Central America, stands as the link between North and South America. In the same way, Ann Marie Zon stands as the link between help for the poor in Nicaragua and generous donors in Western New York.

The oldest of three children of Louis and Lucille Zon of East Amherst, Ann Marie is quick to give credit to her parents for her happiness and extraordinary humor.

She greeted Monsignor Richard Wetter from the Town of Tonawanda, Helen Bowen and Marian LaVigne, retired teachers from Williamsville, and me at the airport in Managua, where an estimated 800 people have visited her in the 27 years that she has served the poorest of the poor in this beautiful country.

When she was principal of Queen of All Saints School in Lackawanna, Ann Marie met Alfonso Alvarado Lugo, an exchange student from Nicaragua.

After he returned home and completed his studies in the seminary, Alfonso and fellow priest Leonel Nadas Lopez asked her to come to Nicaragua to help in their mission work with the poor in the mountain area of the country.

"I came. I didn't know the language, but being stubborn, I made up my mind to stay," she said.

She left the Felician Sisters, deciding to devote her life to helping the poverty-stricken country.

"I lived in the closet of the rectory in Teustepe for 12 years," she said. "When I first, first, first came, I brought teaching supplies. I brought crayons, and (the kids) ate them. They never saw crayons."

Alfonso praised the work Zon has accomplished.

"When she makes up her mind, she does it," he said. "And now she even speaks the language very fluently."

The initial 22 boxes sent by her other grew to 700 boxes from friends.

Red tape faced her when she was told she had to send her own container.

Undaunted, Zon soon had 18-wheeler containers at her parents' home on Transit Road. Volunteers, who often number 70, work at the Zon home each Tuesday sorting and boxing donations.

This year, 39 containers were shipped to Teustepe, where they are unloaded and sorted.

We witnessed the boxes being given to the nearly 200 women who lined up in the street waiting for their turn. One young woman wore a Williamsville High School T-shirt.

When the two priests were transferred to Rivas, a southern town on Lake Nicaragua, Ann Marie's parents bought her a house which overlooks the lake and is furnished with donated items. Her clothes also come from the donation boxes.

"Neither the priests nor I get paid, so we understand what the people go through," she said.

A five-hour drive along dirt and pot-holed roads took us to "the farm" which supplies cows and bulls to the poor. There's no electricity, and water comes from a well driven by a windmill.

"Cows can be 'bought' for \$100," Zon said. "We teach the family how to take care of it, how to raise the calves."

Zon's native parish of St. Paul's in Kenmore donated money to buy nine cows.

Because education is so important, Ann Marie started a fund, asking for a \$30 donation for an elementary school child for a year, \$50 for high school and \$100 for college. School is in session seven days a week, two sessions a day. Many of the school desks are stamped with the names of Western New York schools that have closed.

In spite of all the poverty, Ann Marie says she is very lucky.

"I'm in the middle," she said. "Over on that (U.S.) side, I see generosity. On this side, I see faith and humility. I'm very blessed."



GANNETT NEWS SERVICE

Nicaragua's good news

Don't think there are no good things happening in Nicaragua. The following is a list of good news:

- Three wells were dug in February at Popoyuapa funded by the Rotary Club International.
- Tourism is on the rise. Although twice leveled by earthquakes, Managua hosts a beautiful music hall, as well as art museums and modern hotels. Pristine beaches stretch for miles along the Pacific seacoast. Volcanic and beautiful homes dot the volcanic mountains.
- Sugar cane, rice, banana, coffee and tobacco plantations help the country's economy.

Most-needed items

- Baby and children's clothes, particularly long-sleeved "onesies"
 - Toys
 - Hand tools
 - Paper — even stationery used on only one side.
 - Personal care products
 - Furniture, dishes
 - Monetary donations
- Items can be delivered to 10100 Transit Road, East Amherst, or mailed to Nicaragua Mission Project, c/o Ann Marie Zon, 10100 Transit Road, East Amherst, NY 14051.