

# New Orleans CITYBUSINESS

## **New Orleans doctors come to aid of Nicaraguan children**

**by Richard A. Webster Staff Writer**

*Editor's note: Staff reporter Richard A. Webster was stationed in Leon, Nicaragua, Oct. 11-18 with New Orleans Medical Missions Services, a nonprofit that provides medical services to the world's impoverished people.*

LEON, Nicaragua - On the outskirts of Leon, 30 children, some less than a year old, none older than 12, are lined up in the mud outside of a small house where a local couple hand out free lunch.

For most of the children, it will be the only meal they eat all day.

Standing next to the line of children is 19-year-old Rachael Bazzett, a volunteer with New Orleans Medical Mission Services. Beside her is a girl, no more than 3 feet tall, maybe 3 years old.

Her name is Regina. She looks up at Bazzett with saucer-like eyes, and as she smiles two large dimples appear in her plush cheeks. She doesn't speak; she only smiles and holds onto Bazzett's hand, as if this American girl with the curly blond hair was her mother.

Bazzett met Regina just an hour earlier, but in that time she said she fell in love with this small child.

"It's those brown eyes," Bazzett said. "And that smile. All she wants is a little affection. She's so innocent."

### **Victims of war, political turmoil**

And yet the world around Regina is hard and cruel.

These children living in squalor, born into poverty unheard of in the United States, are the victims of decades of war and political turmoil that has left much of Nicaragua in economic ruins.

Unless drastic changes occur, as Regina grows older the deplorable conditions of her world will bleed her innocence dry. And the only reminder she will have of these brief years of happiness as a child will be in the photos taken of her years ago by foreign journalists.

"I want to take her home with me," Bazzett said, her voice tinged with both love and sadness, knowing there was little she could do to save Regina.

New Orleans Medical Mission Services spent a week in Nicaragua, Oct. 11-18, distributing medical supplies and performing surgeries in three hospitals in Leon and Chinandega.

On their fifth day in-country NOMMS volunteer Dana Atchinson led a small team to an impoverished town on the outskirts of Leon to perform vision tests and distribute eyeglasses to children 12 years old and younger.

As the small caravan left Leon, the pavement of the city turned to dirt and the solid cement buildings gave way to crumbling brick structures with rusted corrugated tin roofs. An elderly man shoveled mud out of a wheelbarrow into cavernous potholes. Children in rags wandered by the side of the road followed by emaciated dogs, their mangy skin stretched taut over bulging ribs and hipbones.

The cars carrying the New Orleans volunteers stopped in front of a small building. Inside, a handful of mothers and dozens of children sat quietly in plastic chairs, watching the strange visitors with curiosity.

As Atchinson set up the equipment and unloaded cases of eyeglasses, Bazzett sat on a small riser and blew up a black balloon. She tied off the end and with a snap sent it floating in the air.

The children eyed it with amazement. They jumped out of their seats, hands raised in the air, and stumbled clumsily after it, wide smiles fixed on their faces as their tiny squeals filled the room.

An older woman stood in the front of the house underneath a banner that read, "Sexual abuse is a crime. If you are a victim report abuse to the police."

The woman looked at the children and smiled.

"Look at them," she said. "They have nothing but they're so happy. They don't know that they're poor." She paused and shook her head. "But this happiness is temporary. When they get older, everything will change for the worse."

The woman and her husband, both Nicaraguans, arranged the NOMMS day trip. In a sense, they have adopted the children of this impoverished village, providing free lunch Monday through Friday to at least 350 boys and girls.

The couple wished to remain anonymous for fear that their charity would attract the attention and retribution of the Sandinista government.

### **Sandinistas take control**

After the revolution of 1979 that brought the Sandinistas into power, the couple fled to New Orleans. Many Nicaraguans believed that the victory over the Somoza regime would bring peace and prosperity to the country. But once the Sandinistas took control they became as corrupt and bloodthirsty as their predecessors, said Jorge Ruiz, a NOMMS volunteer and Nicaraguan native.

Those who suffered under the Somoza regime and supported the Sandinistas quickly grew disillusioned. The kidnappings, rapes and murders continued; the only thing that changed was the political affiliation of their assailants.

After Hurricane Katrina, the couple moved back to Nicaragua. The Sandinistas had been out of power since 1990 when President Daniel Oretaga was defeated in the elections. So they decided after the storm that it was time to return to their homeland. But a few months after their repatriation, Ortega was re-elected with 38 percent of the vote.

The wife laughed bitterly at the irony. But this time, she said, they are staying for good.

"There's just too much work to be done," she said, watching the boys and girls play with the balloons. "These children need help or else this cycle of abuse and pain will continue."

Nicaragua is one of the poorest countries in the world. The minimum wage is \$100 a month and 60 percent of the population lives on \$1 a day.

In Regina's village, there is little work to be found and the population is largely uneducated. The lucky few make it to the sixth grade but most children are taken out of school earlier by their parents and made to sell fruit by the side of the road or beg in the streets. If they return home empty-handed they are beaten, the wife said.

But a beating is the least of the worries for the girls.

Many of the men are unemployed and spend the day drinking, the husband said. When they come

home at night, stinking of alcohol, filled with anger and machismo, it is not uncommon for them to rape their daughters, the wife said.

"And the mothers say nothing. They fear they will lose their husbands if they speak up. But the men will eventually leave them for a younger woman anyway. And then many of the women leave their children behind to find work in Costa Rica or for another man. The children are either taken care of by their grandmothers or completely abandoned."

She pointed to a young girl holding an infant on her hip. She was only 12 years old and yet she is responsible for the care of her six brothers and sisters.

"This is normal here," the wife said.

Contraception is not an option either as it is too expensive. Many of the girls become pregnant by the age of 13. The people of this poor village can't even afford the 50 cents it costs to take the bus to Leon to receive proper medical care, the wife said. The situation is dire. Regina and her family don't even have a home, Bazzett was told.

"This is why we are trying to build a facility that will offer day care, education, daily meals and job training," the husband said. "It's the only thing we believe that will break this terrible cycle of poverty that few can escape."

### **Too late to treat some**

NOMMS traveled to the impoverished village to provide eyeglasses to children, many of whom didn't even have a pair of shoes. But for some it was too late. A woman held a 1-year-old girl whose left eye was clouded milky white, blinded from malnutrition.

In the end, NOMMS tested the vision of 98 children and handed out roughly 30 pairs of glasses.

As the team packed up and prepared to leave they found it difficult to tear themselves away from the dozens of children who surrounded them.

"These kids gave us so much more than we gave them," said volunteer Darla Bergeron. "They just fill your heart with so much love."

But handing out glasses, while needed, would do little to solve the larger problems. The volunteers couldn't ignore the dismal fate that awaited many of these children unless something drastic is done to save them.

"That rape statistic rattled me, particularly as I looked at how happy some of these kids were," Atchinson said. "The folks in that village make it hard to feel sorry for people (in the U.S.), especially when you hear what battles these kids will face in the next few years."

As the time came for the NOMMS team to leave, Bazzett looked down at Regina who hadn't released her grip on Bazzett's hand for more than an hour.

"I don't want to go. I don't want to leave her behind," Bazzett said. But she had no choice. She gave Regina a hug, kissed her goodbye and crawled into the car.

"My heart's just breaking," Bazzett said.

As the vehicle carrying the NOMMS volunteers crawled down the road, a small group of children could be seen in the rearview mirror jumping and waving goodbye. One by one they peeled off from the group and fell from view leaving a small child standing by herself, her tiny hand waving in the air like a metronome, her brown eyes fixed on the disappearing vehicle searching for her friend, the American girl with the blond hair.

She stood in the middle of the dirt road for a minute, growing smaller as the car grew more distant until, eventually, she dropped her arm, walked off the road and disappeared from view. •