

February 21, 1999

Dear friends,

I am sitting in the airport in Atlanta, Georgia awaiting the arrival of Dr. Skip Lee. We have just arrived back in the U.S. after three weeks of clinics in Nicaragua.

I struggle to place into words the feelings that I have for Nicaragua, and for the experiences that have most left an impression on me over the past month.

Perhaps it was the land of beauty that greeted me. Nicaragua is a word in the native Indian language that means "the land of volcanoes and lakes". It holds up in every way to this description.

Perhaps, on the other hand, it was seeing the needs of the more than 1,300 patients that we saw, and trying in some measure to relieve the suffering and hopelessness of so many of them.

Or, perhaps it was standing on the mud plains at Las Casitas volcano, where during hurricane Mitch, super heated water broke over a natural dam causing a scalding mud flow which literally obliterated every man, woman, child, animal, tree, or building as it burst down the side of the mountain into what once were three modern, and well established villages. This catastrophe taking place at night, it burst suddenly upon a sleeping population of approximately 3,000 people, seconds later leaving over 2,000 dead and buried in it's wake. Today the pall and stench of death is all that remains of the victims. The living are perhaps not so fortunate. They exist in a living hell in squalid refugee camps where powdery volcanic dust puffs up with every footstep, where pure water is nonexistent, and sanitation impossible. Whole families huddle under plastic shacks awaiting the further agony of the rainy season which will arrive in less than two months. One can only imagine the living conditions then when bare dust fields and floors turn into mud.

Perhaps what broke my heart was having Pastor Mario tell us of the prophetic word which was received for the nation of Nicaragua from Isaiah 40:1-4.

"Comfort, O comfort my people," says your God. "Speak kindly to Jerusalem; and call out to her, that her warfare has ended, that her iniquity has been removed, that she has received of the Lord's hand double for all her sins."

The words so beautifully spoken by the prophet over 2500 years ago hold equal import for the ravaged and suffering nation of Nicaragua.

On the other hand, perhaps it was swinging gently in my hammock as I was awakened from my sleep at Jocote as I was nudged from below by the pig with which I shared the living room. Then lying awake within the woven cocoon listening to the sounds of the barking dogs, crowing roosters, and the coughs of children in the rest of the house.

One certainly cannot forget the outhouse which was approached only after stepping over, and around, several sleeping pigs, chickens, and dogs, and then crossing the six inch wide foot bridge. One took his chances, not withstanding the urgency of diarrhea at night, and needed to take the time to clear a sitting area of about a zillion very well fed, fat, cockroaches. It was actually rather comical to see the wave of antennae undulating out of the toilet seat, but rather disconcerting to think of what might tickle it's way across ones exposed backside in the darkness.

Maybe it was the impoverished Indian mother who wept as she learned that her ten month old baby boy had an extremely serious heart defect and probably would soon be dead because of failure to

thrive.

There is so much more, and words are so inadequate to express what I feel. However, I think that there is one thing that stands out most clearly in my memories of Nicaragua, and that is the people. Despite the pain, both past and present, or perhaps because of it, the people are warm and loving. I fell in love with the warmth and gentleness of the people whom I went to serve. This is what has left it's most lasting impression me over the past weeks.

We are on our way to Mexico from here where we will be holding two weeks of clinics. From there we will be heading for Haiti where we will hold a further week of clinics. Please remember to pray for us, and especially for continued health for Dr. Heinlein who has had several close brushes with his health while we were in Nicaragua.

Your prayers and support is so necessary for the continuation of this work.

Your missionary