Envying a poverty-stricken carpenter in Nicaragua

By Daniel J. Glenn

Daniel J. Glenn is a student in the department of architecture. He recently returned from his third trip to Nicaragua where he worked as a volunteer architect for five months. Today's article is the seventh in a series for The Tech, which he wrote while the Tech was in Nicaragua.

The Nicaragua we worked with Jesus. We didn't go to Nicaragua to find Jesus, and Jesus certainly wasn't looking for us. But during our five months of living and working in the mountains of Matagalpa, Jesus became an important part of our lives.

The Jesus we met in Nicaragua has yet to die for our sins, however. Though everyday the mortar fire of the continuum comes closer to his clay shanty, he was so important to us because without him, we never could have completed our work and through him we learned as much about life as we did about construction.

Jesus Herrera is an illiterate, underskilled carpenter with the build of a lightweight boxer and the spoken voice of a poet. He's 39 years old and lives in a wooden shack with a dirt floor and leaky clay tile roof. When he's not laying bricks or notching bamboo, he's engaged in his favorite pasttime: baseball.

When Jesus smiles, as he often does once you get to know him, you never see his lack of front teeth. He explained that they couldn't be fixed. He showed me his teeth and said, "Esto alli," which means, "This is all." When he tells a story, he becomes the characters he describes. To him, the identity of each bamboo notch he fashions with his machete is a part of him.

When he points at something, he points with his teeth fixed. He explained that they would break again if another baseball flew into his face. He had never heard of a baseball until we told him, and he quickly became a big fan. Whenever he saw a baseball in the street, he would pick it up and throw it around.

Through our relationship with Jesus, we learned a great deal about the people of Nicaragua, and Jesus himself became a role model for us. We were able to share our dreams and ambitions with him, and he shared his with us.

One day we had to decide whether to use hemp rope or wire to tie our connections. "How long will the hemp last?" I asked Jesus. "About 10 years," he said. "And the wire?" I asked. "Maybe 50." "Then we should use the wire, right Jesus?" "No, the hemp will do," he said. "Why?" The Aggression," said Jesus. "Nobody will be here in 10 years."

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That was an example of Jesus' black humor. In the end, we used galvanized wire; we decided to build for a more optimistic future.

Susan and I fell in love with the children of Jesus. Their smiling eyes and sweet demeanor seemed so defiant amidst the constant shadow of poverty and war. Nicaragua is a country of children; the average age is 15. We spent many evenings in their little shack listening with the children to Jesus' many stories and helping them teach Jesus how to read.

Often when we were confronted with a tricky construction problem, our first reaction was to want to rush to the hardware store in Matagalpa and buy a solution. But Jesus reminded us that we were building for the poorest campesinos, and they couldn't afford a longer rope or a new pair of wire cutters; he would improvise with his machete or a bamboo pole. He taught us to think like campesinos.

When Jesus points at something, he points with his whole body. Even his lips form a pointer: "Esta alli," he says. He puts all of himself into everything he does; each notch he fashions with his machete is a part of him. When he tells a story, he becomes the characters he describes.

Jesus, like many Latin American men, is extremely proud of his strength and toughness. He loved it when we would all gather at his ability to throw around eight meter bamboo poles like matchsticks. But one day Guito, an Ecuadorian member of our work team, and I decided to challenge him to lucha libre, wrestling. He loved the idea but it took us awhile to convince him that lucha libre is different from his preferred lucha, fist fighting. I wasn't about to go near him until that subtle difference was clearly understood.

We cleared an area under the partially complete roof of our bamboo house and faced off. He was spitting on his hands and pawing at the ground like a bull ready for the kill. I was scared to death but hoped my years of high school wrestling would pay off. As he came lunging at me I slipped out from under him and he fell to the ground. When he did get a hold of me I could barely move under his grip, but in the end technique prevailed over brute force. The frustration of a skinny white boy throwing him around grazed at him like the ball stoned in his belly. But his anger never turned to fists, lucky for me.

Near the end of our trip, one of our closest friends and co-workers on the bamboo house died in a drowning accident; we were all devastated by the tragedy. But I believe each of us wanted to die in a way we thought we should react. Jesus reacted with all of his heart and mind, purely without any hesitation or selfish bravado. When he saw Rogelio's body lying on the beach, he came running, tears streaming down his face. He fell to his knees at Rogelio's side, and kissed his face. "Companero, compañero," he cried.

One time I asked Jesus what he thought of the revolution. He thought about it for a long time, then he said: "The best part of this revolution is it has given me the chance to learn from people like you, and for you to learn from us."

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