

# People-to-People Partnerships

By Kris Rued-Clark

This is a story about partnerships. About helping hands between one country and another, a give and take of materials and knowledge, people who travel to learn about each other. It is also the story of the partnership between a mother and her daughter. This is a story about Wisconsin/Nicaragua Partners of the Americas (W/NP), and how a small non-profit agency came to be headquartered in Stevens Point. Even though this partnership spans two continents, over four decades, and many people, at the heart of this partnership's history is a mother-daughter relationship.

Amy Wiza never intended to work with her mother. The youngest of four children, Amy attended college with her mother, Sherin Bowen. "Her plans for college were interrupted by marriage and children, so we went to college together." Sherin majored in international studies, then wondered what she would do with the seemingly impractical degree in central Wisconsin.

"She had heard about this organization and we went to Madison to check it out. She gave me a ticket to Nicaragua for my graduation present." Amy laughs as she adds, "Now I realize it was because she didn't want to go down there by herself." On their trip, in 1991, Amy and Sherin saw for themselves it was a worthy, credible organization.

"Upon our return, my Mom continued to volunteer for the organization, and when they needed a new director and offered her the position, she accepted and moved the state office to Stevens Point."

Wisconsin/Nicaragua Partners of the Americas is part of a larger organization called Partners of the Americas. "It was Kennedy's initial idea to link the Americas together," explains Amy. "He wanted to develop citizen partnerships among the people."

The concept was simple: a country in South or Cen-

tral America was linked with a state in the U.S. Several states are partnered with larger countries such as Mexico, but Wisconsin is the only state partnered with Nicaragua. That makes the accomplishments of the Wisconsinites even more remarkable.

Learning Centers are just one aspect of the partnership. Over 100 learning centers in Nicaragua are supplied with resources for their programs in large part by the Wisconsin partners. "Women in Wisconsin asked women in Nicaragua what was their greatest need. They wanted to be able to remain in their communities, but also have some type of work/income to help feed their families."

Initially, sewing machines and supplies were donated, and women began to sew for income. "The sewing centers started in 1979, and then branched out as they incorporated additional skills in cosmetology, carpentry, electricity, and gardening. Gradually, as the skill sets expanded, they transitioned from sewing centers to learning centers," explains Amy.

Each learning center is self-governed. "The local communities decide where they will meet, what classes to offer, and who will teach them. We provide the resources – like sewing machines, fabrics, notions and thread." A used sewing machine becomes very valuable in the hands of a Nicaraguan woman who is using it to help feed her family.

"We collect all kinds of items for the learning centers. For example, a beauty shop here might update their equipment and give us their chairs, or curling irons." Cooking and cake decorating supplies are also very helpful and popular.

Last year, visitors from Nicaragua learned about the YMCA, Little League, and Stevens Point Youth Softball. "They gained a better understanding of the process in starting a youth sports program. That's what the W/NP program is about, identifying commonalities between people here and in Nicaragua. Parents always want to help provide opportunities for their children. It's doesn't matter if they're here or there."

This coming month, W/NP will ship three 40-foot containers of donated items, including sewing machines, bicycles, and hospital beds. "The Plover Fire Department just donated one of their fire trucks. We've sent over 20 EMS vehicles, including ambulances and fire trucks."

Five staff members in Nicaragua co-



ordinate all the programs. "We work hard to have high quality projects. We are very careful to make the best use of our time and resources. What we're doing is worthy."

The library project is a favorite of Amy's. "In 2006 we added a small library to one of the learning centers. When we first suggested the idea, they looked at me like I was crazy. They'd never heard of a lending library."

Rosa, a Nicaraguan partner, opened her home for the first library. "The learning center is inside her home." Originally there were 14 children and 150 books. "Now she has 326 kids and over 2,000 books. Every Saturday she opens her home to the community and exchanges books. The children play games and meet other kids. They really like it there."

Another lending library was established in February 2010, and named in honor of Amy's mother. Sherin was Executive Director of Wisconsin/Nicaragua Partners of the Americas for 12 years before retiring and passing the reins on to Amy. Last year, during a trip in Nicaragua, Sherin was injured in a fall, and her injuries proved fatal.

A special event is planned to honor Sherin's vision and legacy. "We want to raise awareness about the organization and to honor her work, what she did to build the organization to what it is today. She was a huge humanitarian. She gave her life to helping people in Nicaragua."

Amy's dad, Robert Bowen, continues to volunteer. "I don't know what I'd do without him," adds Amy. The public celebration, set for June 5 in the Noel Group Hangar, Stevens Point, will demonstrate the ongoing work of Wisconsin/Nicaragua Partners, and also honor Sherin's life and her work with the program.

For more information, go to [wnp.uwsp.edu](http://wnp.uwsp.edu) or call 715-346-4702. To learn more about Sherin Bowen, go to [www.sherinbowen.com](http://www.sherinbowen.com)

