

Brookline-Quezalguaque Sister City Project

www.brooklinesistercity.org

Celebrating Twenty-Five Years 1987—2012

Background

In 1956, President Eisenhower proposed a people-to-people program for citizens and community organizations. Participating cities were to communicate both professionally and socially, paving the way for improved cultural understanding, technical assistance, and economic investment in education, health care, the environment and other areas.

In 1985, Maxine Shaw, a Brookline resident and teacher, traveled to Quezalguaque, Nicaragua. Maxine stayed for two years, teaching in a one-room schoolhouse in the rural region of Quezalguaque. There was no plumbing in the school, no school supplies, no meal program, and inadequate or inaccessible health services for her students.

During the two years that Maxine lived in Quezalguaque and in response to her requests, many Brookline residents made contributions to support her work and the community. The support continued after her return, and in 1987, a resolution was passed by Town Meeting, formally established Quezalguaque as Brookline's Sister City, opening the door for cultural, educational, and other exchanges between the two communities.

Twenty-five years later, Brookline's Sister City Project continues to thrive, providing financial and other types of support for a number of different programs in Quezalguaque. The Project

relies totally on volunteer contributions. No public tax funds support the Project and volunteers travel at their own expense to Quezalguaque.



Demographics

Quezalguaque is a small village near the Pacific coast of Nicaragua that was settled by the Spanish in 1610. The majority of its 9,900 residents live in rural areas beyond the town's central square, and nearly all live in poverty. The average *per capita* income of Nicaraguans is just over \$3,000 per year.

Projects

Since its founding in 1987, Brookline-Quezalguaque Sister City Project (BQSCP's) has promoted numerous projects in Quezalguaque, and more than 250 Brookline residents have had the opportunity to visit and volunteer in Quezalguaque. The following are examples of some of BQSCP activities in Quezalguaque.

Health Center

In 1989, funding and volunteer support from Brookline led to the construction of the *Centro de Salud* (health center) in Quezalguaque. In 2004, we funded a renovation of the satellite health post in Cristo Rey.

Because of space constraints and at the request of the health leadership in Quezalguaque, in 2009 the Sister City Project funded construction of a new urgent care wing at the *Centro de Salud*. Later in the year, the Sister City Project secured \$141,000 worth of medical equipment and furniture through the International Medical Equipment Collaborative (IMEC) for the center.

The *Centro de Salud* is open seven days a week, 24 hours a day, and staffed by physicians and nurses. There are now also two satellite clinics serving outlying areas. Together, the three sites have approximately 30,000 patient visits annually.

In late 2011, the Sister City Project committed to fund the renovation of the satellite clinic in *Las Mercedes*. We also have regularly provided funds for medical supplies and equipment and have funded transportation services, allowing health center personnel to staff the health post in Las Mercedes.

Disaster Relief

In 1989 and 1999, Brookline rallied to provide relief to its Sister City after hurricanes Joan and Mitch. A 20-ton container left Brookline in January 1999, filled with 31,000 pounds of powdered milk and large sacks of rice and beans, along with clothing and medical and school supplies to aid victims of Hurricane Mitch.

Library

Quezalguaque's first library was constructed in 2004 with support from the Brookline Sister City Project; the Brookline Rotary donated computers and library furnishings, and Brookline High School students raised \$3,500 for books. Now open six days a week, the library is also used by residents of neighboring towns. In

addition, the Friends of the Brookline Public Library generously donate the proceeds from their annual book sale to the library in Quezalguaque.



The Sister City Project has also funded a mobile library designed to make books available to children in outlying communities in

the Quezalguaque area. Another project is an arts program in the main library that attracts younger people and affords students the opportunity to advance their artistic skills.

Public Health Issues

The Sister City Project has been involved in multiple public health initiatives to combat local and regional problems along with Boston University and Harvard University public health and medical school students.

Some of the projects involving graduate student have been:

- a household survey to identify barriers to access to primary health care services,
- a handwashing and infection control campaign to combat diarrheal disease,
- a study of the prevalence of chronic kidney disease, and
- a hypertension screening combining referrals to primary care providers and health education.

In the summer of 2011, hypertension screening for 1,727 adults was carried out, and almost 200 persons attended health education programs.



This effort was organized and offered through a volunteer team that included bilingual graduate students from the Boston University School of Public Health and health outreach workers from Quezalguaque funded by the Sister City Project.

Chronic Kidney Disease

In response to early concerns about the prevalence of renal failure, the Sister City Project conducted field research and studies of water and other possible contributing factors beginning in 2003. In part because of these early efforts, the Boston University School of Public Health was awarded funding from the World Bank to investigate the causes of the epidemic of chronic kidney disease in the region.

Housing



With funding from many Brookline donors, and initially in collaboration with Habitat for Humanity, fifteen homes were built in Quezalguaque with Sister City support. All of these

homes had stoves (*ecofogones*) installed to reduce indoor pollution contributing to upper respiratory problems. The stoves not only reduced this pollution but also helped the environment by consuming less wood than traditional open fires and provided a few jobs in a town with high unemployment.

More recently, the Sister City Project has supplemented the Nicaraguan National Housing Project. Families need to have a \$200 down payment to participate in the program. BQSCP



has covered this expense for families that could not meet this requirement. Ten homes have been constructed, and another thirteen will be built with funds awarded by the Sister

City Project.

Education

In 2006, the Sister City Project raised funds for the construction of a school in Soledad Nueva. This project had been the overwhelming choice of representatives from all the rural communities and the urban center of Quezalguaque. Approximately 65 children attend classes there each day.

A revitalized Education Committee has channeled funds to the *Pipitos*, a special education school, in Quezalguaque to help with food and school supplies. With a grant from *Sueños* (The Dream Project), they are also working on plans to provide needed furniture and equipment for the school.

In January 2012, two board members with expertise and experience in teaching English as a Second Language led a three-day workshop in Quezalguaque for English language teachers. They worked on plans for three Brookline teachers who were awarded funding by the Brookline Education Foundation to travel to Quezalguaque in February to further cultural understanding and educational collaboration.

25th Anniversary Celebration

In honor of the 25th anniversary of the Brookline-Quezalguaque Sister City Project, the Mayor of Quezalguaque, the Director of the Health Center and the Director of Education will be visiting Brookline from May 11 to 16, 2012.



Hugo Ruiz, Mayor of Quezalguaque
Sayda Hernandez, Director of the Health Center
Jose Murillo, Director of Education

Visits to schools and meetings with health, education and other officials in Brookline are being planned. A celebration event/fundraiser is scheduled for Saturday, May 12th, and a presentation with the Board of Selectmen is scheduled for the evening of Tuesday, May 15th.