

Title: Combating Diabetes in Nicaragua

Project Country: Nicaragua

Sponsoring College: University of Florida

Student Leader: Simon Mair (Austria, University of Florida, UWC Dilijan)

A two-sentence summary of the goals of your project

Combating Diabetes in Nicaragua aimed to act against the lack of medical supplies and educational resources for patients living with type 1 diabetes in the country. The goal of the project was to provide people with tools that would help them feel knowledgeable and in charge of their own lives and medical condition.

How did you come up with the idea for your project?

We started thinking about our project based on a team member's personal experience living with type 1 diabetes since she was 3 years old. Aurora was born and raised in Nicaragua. Thanks to her family's support, she has been able to take proper care of her condition; however, she grew up aware of how little access to medical attention, supplies, and information there was for other patients like her. We did some research on the topic and found out that more than 12% of the Nicaraguan population are suffering from some type of diabetes (numbers of 2015) and that it is the third most common cause of death in the country. The numbers are concerning for a place with a population of just about 6.5 million. As Aurora is familiar with the lack of resources and the disconnect between patients and the health care system, we decided we wanted to provide people with information and supplies that would give them the agency to take better care of themselves and educate others along the way.

Why do you think the issue your project is responding to exists?

We believe the issue stems from an infinite number of systemic problems, such as lack of education, poor access to information, and corruption, which all translate into an inefficient economic system that is unable and unwilling to provide integral health care attention to those who need it the most, including people who live with diabetes or any other chronic conditions. Nicaragua has no funding for basic medical supplies such as a glucometer per patient, monthly test strips, and disposable insulin syringes, which is why we wanted our project to provide some of such supplies and information.

Why did you choose your host site to work in?

We chose Nicaragua because it is the community Aurora was born into and of which we did the most research on. Also, because even healthcare access is tied to the government in place and we did not want our project to be associated with it in any way, we thought Projects for Peace would be the perfect opportunity to help facilitate some change without having to deal with political propaganda. Furthermore, the initial organizations we planned to work with had experience doing social and humanitarian work in the field, which made us feel secure while applying for the grant and thinking of how to make it happen.

Did you feel at any point that the project was not going to work? In what ways?

We knew we got the grant two days after the COVID-19 pandemic was declared by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention in March 2020. Amid the situation, we were still hopeful the project could be executed that summer. However, soon after we learned all projects for that summer had been cancelled. After that, uncertainty filled our brains, and nothing seemed clear or plausible for several months; we were upset and worried. Once we were told projects would resume this year, we felt excited once again, what we did not see coming was having to make it work remotely. Initially, we doubted it could work because we wanted to prioritize people living with type 1 diabetes in rural areas and coordinating such efforts from abroad and in areas with little to no access to internet seemed almost impossible to us. Additionally, Nicaragua has handled the pandemic poorly and did not offer enough safety to travel and move around. But inspired by all the uncertainty and shortages the pandemic has caused to the country, we thought it was worth trying our best to make it happen, even if we had to modify it and could not be physically present and as involved as we expected. We also relied on our community partners and their commitment to work with us as much as we could. A

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second time when we thought it was not going to happen was when we could not find in stock the brand of glucometers and medical supplies we wanted to buy and importing them was an option. Aurora had to use her network of contacts in the country to find a company that could sell enough supplies and at a reasonable price for all the patients that had been identified. Luckily, in a matter of days, we found one that not only gave us a good price but also promised to keep it in stock for years to come.

What were the challenges you encountered in communicating with people?

Communicating was the hardest part of our project. Each of us was in a different corner of the world: Aurora was back in Nicaragua, while Simon was in Austria. With lockdowns and travel restrictions still in place, our internal communication had to be online and always dealing with time zone differences. We decided Aurora was in charge of every local communication, which was also challenging because some people did not have cell phone signal or access to internet. We also had to deal with a lot of misinformation as some people thought the project was being organized by the government, which was definitely something we felt the responsibility to correct at all times. In Nicaragua, Aurora contacted via phone calls people from Global Brigades, Red de Jóvenes Líderes, and Cáritas Estelí to discuss logistics and assess exactly what was needed. Because she was in the country, she was able to explore and negotiate some of the prices herself.

How do you define peace?

Peace means to spread love, hope, and understanding across the world. Our planet can only become a better place if every single person becomes aware of this and actively attempts to bring peace to others—no matter if they are best friends or strangers who have never met before. Our project helped dozens of diabetes patients across Nicaragua, and thereby, created a form of dynamic peace within these people, which they will share with others and hence, reinforce the impact of our project.

How does or will your project contribute to peace? Short-term? Long-term?

Our project contributes to peace by not just giving people fish but teaching them how to fish. Of course, most of the money was spent on medical supplies that were donated, but beyond that little help, we were able to have conversations in small teams about how to use them, take care of oneself on a daily basis and keep in mind that diabetes conditions but does not limit the way they can live their lives. After Aurora gave a speech on what it has been like for her to live with type 1 diabetes for almost 17 years of her life, children and adults attending the event felt motivated to ask questions on how to be in charge of their own lives. With this, we can say that in the short term, we were able to spark a light in the patients' eyes by making them believe they can carry on healthy and prosperous lives. Furthermore, people who were benefited by the project had the opportunity to get lab test done and be seen and treated by an endocrinologist, which was something we did not anticipate but realized had the resources to do. They went home having a better understanding of the way they are controlling their condition and ways in which they can improve. All the people who attended, including parents, connected with one another and left determined to create initiatives that would allow them to collect funds to continue affording and having access to medical supplies. Our project was set to provide people with a safe and affordable place to buy medical supplies. In the long term, we expect to see people organizing little events focused on specific issues such as nutrition, eye care, and mental health. Lastly, all the knowledge and advice that was shared among little groups is expected to be passed on to friends, relatives, and other community members.

Please describe changes created by the project during the summer:

First and foremost, Combating Diabetes in Nicaragua changed the way in which people were perceiving their medical condition; they left the event determined to live their best lives. But it did not only change or positively affect people with diabetes, but also the local community. The project was of great significance given the current fall in the global economy, more so in impoverished places such as Nicaragua. We were able to pay for services such as food catering, photography, and advertising,

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which have been largely affected due to the lack of in-person events happening amid the pandemic. The location where we hosted the event, Cáritas Estelí, is a nonprofit we had not counted with when we presented our proposal, yet they also received a contribution that will help with the continuation of their own social programs; additionally, they can now help the community by selling diabetes medical supplies at cost. Though we planned on giving medical supplies to patients with type 1 diabetes only, some type 2 patients were able to benefit as well. By having a device that can help them monitor their blood sugar, they sure feel more in power of making necessary changes in their lifestyles and hopefully continue to live fulfilling lives.

Was your project impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic?

Our project was impacted by the COVID-19 pandemic from beginning to end. First, with communication for not being able to be both of us in the same place. Moreover, due to the global scenery, the country was not receiving shipment of the specific medical supplies we had anticipated on buying. And lastly, because traveling in the country and being at all times exposed to the virus was not a choice, instead of working in different communities, we had to stick to the north central region of the country and gather people in Estelí, the city Aurora is more familiar with. And not necessarily related to the pandemic, but due to taxation, we had to work with \$7,000 instead of \$10,000, which led us to readjust our budget. Making such changes meant that fewer people could benefit from the project, but realistically speaking, even if mobilization had not been an issue, no one was able to provide us with a list of patients, not because of any privacy concerns but simply because the health system does not have a listing nor way of easily provide us with one. We resorted to contacting people by word of mouth and gathered a total of 46 patients, including about 7 with type 2 diabetes. On top of everything, Global Brigades could help us with advice but not with actual hands-on support. In the end, due to COVID-19 concerns, we worked with a team of only 5 people in the field: the endocrinologist, who gave consultations to patients; Aurora's mom, who helped contacting local companies to buy the supplies; two volunteers from Red de Jóvenes Líderes who are studying medicine and were able to assist the endocrinologist; and Aurora, who coordinated the event, gave a presentation, and was making sure that everything was going smoothly. Simon's virtual contribution helped to pay attention to money expenditure and details such as having to follow proper COVID protocols as people were coming in and out of the venue.

Despite the unpredictability of the time and all the challenges we faced, we are grateful for having had the opportunity to positively affect people's lives. Not everyone had the same need or needed to hear the same advice, but they all had the chance to connect with others and themselves on what it means to live with a chronic condition and why it should never prevent them from pursuing their dreams. Ultimately, education is what helps us make the world a better place and all the knowledge and experience we shared might not have been a lot, but it was hopefully enough to inspire people to continue moving forward in life.

"Having seen sparkles in people's eyes makes me feel hopeful that Combating Diabetes in Nicaragua is just the beginning of what will become a much larger organization and support network."

- Aurora Martínez

"Spreading health care means spreading peace. Spreading peace means spreading love. Seeing the happiness of our patients has made me realize that our project will have a lasting impact on their lives and motivated me enormously to consciously keep trying to make the world a little better every day."

- Simon Mair

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Section II: Photographs



Endocrinologist Federico Narvaez gives consultations to people with type 1 diabetes.



Aurora shares with parents and patients with type 1 diabetes about her own experience living with the condition.



Aurora and her mom handle out medical supplies to the mother of a teenager diagnosed with type 1 diabetes.