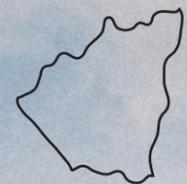


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NICARAGUA

ESTELÍ





From Nicaragua with Love

MAURICIO RODRIGUEZ

Nestled in the mountains of Estelí, Nicaragua lies a small community only accessible by a ten-mile stretch of bumpy gravel road. Don't expect to arrive in any sort of timely manner. If the jarring drive doesn't deter you, you may be slowed by a roadblock of stubborn cattle. Or you may find yourself stopping every few minutes to take another photo of the sweeping emerald hills. After riding out the tumultuous journey, you'll discover a path just off the road that leads to a ramshackle outhouse. The crumbling structure struggles to remain upright, weighed down by its chilling past. Yet the community of Estelí, where the outhouse sits, is testament to a greater story of hurt and hope, resilience and resolve.

In the 1980s, Nicaragua was in the throes of civil war. What began as a series of Contra-led rebellions against the leftist Sandinista government turned into a greater agenda of atrocities, human rights abuses, and ultimately, Sandinista control. The city of Estelí was in the thick of it, bearing much of the violence and destruction that marks its buildings to this day.

It was a time when Nicaraguans found themselves between a rock and a hard place. Among government-imposed rations on food, scarcity of jobs, and no humanitarian organizations to help people make ends meet, many found themselves stuck in a perpetual cycle of poverty. Even the opportunity to receive education came at appalling costs—girls were forced to work at factories and plantations to cover school fees where they were raped and abused. A mandatory part of their education became the very thing that destroyed their lives.

story: brianna lantz
photographs: benj haisch

ESTELÍ, FEBRUARY 7, 2015

Mauricio Rodriguez turns thirty-one today. He is choosing to forego the usual birthday festivities in favor of some uninterrupted time at the base of a tree, alone with the Lord and the land. This tree grows just a few steps away from the outhouse. It towers above all with massive roots dominating everything in its path. Mauricio spends countless hours here, pondering age-old questions: *Why am I here? What am I made for?* The weight of his past never lifts from his mind, and he constantly battles thoughts of rejection by reminding himself of the way God sees him—as a shepherd, but first, as a son.

ESTELÍ, FEBRUARY 7, 1984

When Roque's 14-year-old son Oscar came home from playing baseball in a nearby field, she never could have imagined what he would tell her next: there was a baby in the bottom of the outhouse. When she went to see for herself, her worst fears were confirmed. Fifteen feet below ground lay a newborn baby, umbilical cord and placenta still attached, screaming to be heard. By the looks of it he was born just a few hours prior and quickly discarded. Miraculously, he landed on a wedged board that broke his fall. That board that saved him was the very piece of wood Oscar and his friends had used as a baseball bat and thrown into the outhouse the previous day.

Roque ran to get help from a man named Francisco, who tied himself to a rope and descended into the outhouse to retrieve the crying infant. Roque held ground on the other end of the rope, her petite body slipping under the weight of the grown man suspended in midair. She still bears scars on her legs from that day. But the baby, whose fragile frame should have been marked by scrapes and bruises at the very least, bore no trace of the fall.

At the very same moment that the baby was pulled up from the outhouse, the one bus that traveled through this rural community each afternoon happened to be passing by the scene. Roque ran to the door and dutifully placed him on that bus in hopes that he would reach the hospital, thus leaving his fate to God.

News of the baby spread like wildfire in Estelí. When word reached Lucila Rodriguez that the biological father was her alcoholic brother—who already fathered 25 other children—she was furious. She raced to the hospital, where it was confirmed that this baby, saved within minutes of his life, bore her family's blood. *I will take him*, Lucila decided. *I will call him my own.*

Despite the advice of social services to surrender the baby to an orphanage, Lucila fought through the adoption process and after a year of supervised care was finally granted legal adoption of young Mauricio Rodriguez.



ESTELÍ, MAY 12, 2015

Mauricio slowly approaches the outhouse. The still quiet of the moment is deafening, heavy. He doesn't remember the incident, but his stoic expression suggests that it is still very much a part of him. He breaks the silence by reciting a verse that paints an eerily reminiscent picture: "Psalm 40:2 says, He brought me up out of a horrible pit, out of the miry clay, and set my feet upon a rock, and established my steps."

Just a short walk or horseback ride from the tree and outhouse is a school. Its roof is tin, its walls are brick, and dozens of children of various ages gather here to learn from one teacher. Though the building is simple it represents a safe haven for many children who face abuse at home.

On this particular day, the *clap clap clap* of the horse can be heard from the classroom. Instantly the children scatter. All hope for their undivided attention is lost. Mauricio is coming. Hearing him approach on horseback, they jump out of their chairs and scurry up the dirt path to greet him.

In an instant Mauricio is swarmed by ecstatic children all edging their way in for a hug. He can't contain his grin. He is something of a godfather to these kids, to this land. After all, everyone knows his story, everyone knows he is on a mission, and everyone is rooting for him.

The children lead him behind the school where a large dirt patch serves as their playground. There is one soccer ball that Mauricio brought a few months ago, and it is the holy grail of playtime. Soon, the children split into teams and competition begins.

Within a few minutes, Mauricio breaks away to chat with a quiet boy around the age of ten. "He's been abused, and it's affected his interaction with the children," says Mauricio. "I'm trying to work with him, get him to open up more." Before long, Mauricio extracts a small smile from the boy. It's something. It's progress.

ESTELÍ, SEPTEMBER 6, 1988

Four years after adopting Mauricio, Lucila struggled with the realities of living in a war-ravaged city. "It was impossible to recover from war while also being controlled by the government," she recalls.

Her eldest daughter had successfully immigrated to Los Angeles not long before, and so Lucila began the process of applying for a visa through Mexico. Chances were slim that a solo Nicaraguan immigrant would get approved, much less a family of four. But within a matter of hours, all four of the Rodriguez applications were approved—an occurrence that was unheard of, especially with so many Nicaraguans looking to immigrate out of a bleak situation.

Despite the joy she felt at defying the odds, Lucila was devastated to leave the only place she ever knew and all of the people she ever loved. She didn't know if she would see them again and she was even less sure she would make it to the United States. With nothing more than her children—including a 4-year old Mauricio—and her faith in God, Lucila stepped into the unknown.



MEXICO CITY, SEPTEMBER 7, 1988

"You are not on the list." The first words that Lucila received upon arrival in Mexico took the wind out of her. They had to get on this flight in order to make it to Tijuana, where they would meet their ride to the United States. They were told to wait on stand-by until there were enough open spaces. Lucila prepared for a long wait, doubting that four seats would open up. And then at 4:30am, four people did not show up for their flight.

The family stepped off the plane in Tijuana into a maze of obstacles, from crossing a pitch black river of waste, to dodging drunken men picking fights with border agents, to being stopped and questioned by a U.S. police officer. When the officer at last waved them forward toward Los Angeles, Lucila released the tension she had held throughout their journey. They had made it.

For a journey that should have taken weeks, even months, Lucila gave complete credit to God. She saw His protection in the little miracles that brought her to the United States. And she saw His provision when she immediately landed a job in Los Angeles as a maid and caretaker at the Burbank Holiday Inn. It only paid \$4.25 an hour, but it was enough to provide her family of four a two-bedroom apartment, food on the table, and even a few simple Christmas presents under the tree.

"She always depended on the Lord," Mauricio says of the woman he calls mom. "She never felt like it was hard to live here because of her faith. God kept giving her what she needed."

Despite living as a low-income family by American standards, it was a happy, comfortable life for Mauricio and his siblings. But behind that contentment lurked a set of extraordinary circumstances of which Mauricio remained blissfully unaware for many years.

ESTELÍ, 1999

Mauricio had just returned from a trip to Estelí to visit family. Something about this particular visit was strange. Maybe it was the way people looked at him, like some sort of spectacle. Maybe it was the whispering as he walked by, like everyone knew something he didn't. When he returned home to Los Angeles, he demanded to know the truth about his past.

"You are a gift from heaven," Lucila told him, and then shared the devastating truth of Mauricio's origins.

The truth sent Mauricio into a spiral of depression, self-doubt, and anger. Everything he knew was a lie. His mother wasn't really his mother. Home wasn't really home. As he struggled to make peace with his own story, the Lord planted the seed of an idea in Mauricio's heart. Despite his initial resistance, Mauricio was eventually compelled to return to Estelí and forgive the woman who committed the unthinkable at the outhouse eighteen years prior.

"I had every reason to be a very broken person," he says. "But I discovered a real God who healed my broken heart so I can help bring healing to other broken hearts."



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ESTELÍ, MAY 12, 2015

Mauricio enters Roque's house to the smell of soup on the stove. She is something of a mother figure to Mauricio here in Estelí. She looks at him with a mother's pride, recalling the day thirteen years ago when he appeared on her doorstep after confronting and forgiving his birth mother. After he was put on the bus that fateful day, she never knew what became of him. But when he returned, with a mission and a purpose to forgive and understand, she never knew such joy. "You represent hope to me. I never thought you'd come back," she tells him through tear-filled eyes.

ESTELÍ, PRESENT DAY

Today, 31-year-old Mauricio has forgone a life of comfort in Los Angeles and has moved back to Estelí, with his sights set on purchasing the land where his story began. He hopes to build a facility that will rescue, nurture, disciple, and train teen moms during their pregnancy. The need in Nicaragua is dire: nearly half of teen pregnancies recorded in 2010 to 2011 were the result of rape or incest, and victims range between 12 and 15 years old.

Additionally, around 90% of all Nicaraguan children are abused, according to a local social worker. The government stopped enforcing social services against child abuse long ago, writing it off as a hopeless cause.

"I know I was rescued for a reason," Mauricio says. "To protect and help prepare a future for these children."

For a determined Mauricio, it's time to step up where government failed. It's time to empower young mothers to follow Lucila's and Roque's faithful footsteps, to equip children to be the future leaders of the world. It's time to reclaim Estelí and the youth who are abandoned and abused in the wake of extreme hardship. Mauricio believes that Estelí is a picture of his own story, one that says even the darkest of pasts can give way to the most hopeful of futures.

"I understand that God brought me back here," Mauricio says. "Life is a gift so that we can bless others. Freely we've been given; freely we give."



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