

Mother Preserves Past at Estelí Museum

By Madeleine Bair

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ESTELÍ – To political cynics, President Daniel Ortega's promise of peace and reconciliation, mentioned in campaign songs and repeated in numerous Sandinista stump speeches last year, may just have been more promises from another campaign.

But for Guillermina Montenegro, a woman whose work it is to relive Nicaragua's bloody past every day, it is peace and reconciliation that her country desperately needs.

She should know. A woman whose worn face reveals the hardship endured in her 59 years, Montenegro has experienced Nicaragua's period of war three times over – first as a mother, then as a soldier, and now as the manager of Estelí's Galería de Héroes y Mártires, or Gallery of Heroes and Martyrs.

Galleries and museums like this one are scattered throughout the towns and cities that played a large role in the Sandinista Revolution that toppled the four-decade Somoza family dictatorship in 1979.

Each one is run by associations of the mothers of fallen revolutionaries, and each is a humble and moving tribute to the thousands of young soldiers who died fighting Somoza's National Guard in the 1970s, or later defending the country against the U.S.-backed Contra rebels in the 1980s.

Estelí, today a tranquil cowboy city tucked into the green mountains of northern Nicaragua, paid a high price during the revolution.

In the Galería, fading black-and-white photographs cover the walls of the large room and put names to faces of Estelí's fallen sons and daughters. The faces are strikingly young, as if they were taken at a junior high prom.

Montenegro says the photos represent just a small fraction of Estelí's martyrs. Many families did not have photographs, or purged them from their walls out of fear that the National Guard would see them and target their children.

No one knows the exact number of Estelí's sons and daughters killed in the fighting of the 1970s and 1980s, but Montenegro says the list of the mothers of fallen soldiers numbers over 5,000.

Carrying the Torch

These days, the number of mothers of the heroes and martyrs is gradually shrinking, and for the past eight years Montenegro has

Keeping Son's Memory Alive: Guillermina Montenegro with photograph of her son, Juan José, who fell in battle at age 14.



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been left alone to carry on the work of the museum.

It is a job with few rewards.

When the Sandinistas were voted out of power in 1990, all government funding for the museum was cut. For the next 16 years, the gallery relied entirely on donations left behind by visitors.

The colorful mural of revolutionaries that covers the outside walls has faded with time and neglect, and the gardens contain trash left behind by the few people who sleep on the museum's steps.

But the museum and the memories it preserves of Nicaragua's recent bloody past are too important to Montenegro to leave to the dust. And with Ortega's return to power last month, Montenegro and other keepers of the revolutionary past have new hope that the government will again help to preserve the memory.

Mother, Soldier

For the past 16 years, Montenegro's job has been a lonely one filled with ghosts.

Day in and day out, Montenegro arrives at the building near the town square, picks up the trash, sweeps the floors and kindly greets visitors who come from all over the world. And, if anyone should ask her, Montenegro will tell them why she does it.

"My story," she begins slowly, "is the story of my son, Juan José."

Juan José was just 14 when he told his mom he was going to join the Sandinista rebels. He was determined, he told her, to fight for the liberation of his country.

"He was just a child," she says, "but he thought like an adult."

Between September 1978 and April 1979, Estelí saw three bloody insurrections as guerrilla fighters tried seizing power from government officials.

Montenegro never heard from her son during the campaign.

"So I left, and I joined an encampment to enlist in the Sandinista Front," she said, adding that she not only wanted to find her son's whereabouts, but also to support him in battle.

When Montenegro arrived at the Sandinista military camp, she said she went up to the commander of the base and said, "If my son is dead, tell me, don't leave me in the dark."

When she received a hug as an answer, she knew her fears had come true.

Though Montenegro has told the story of Juan José countless times over the years, she still has to remove her glasses to wipe the tears from her eyes as she recounts the tragic memories of war. Above her on the wall of photographs, her son's striking young face

looks back at her.

A mother's grief never subsides. That's why Montenegro spent the next eight years in the Sandinista Front continuing the fight that took her son.

And that is why today she still works daily to make sure no one ever forgets Nicaragua's history.

"The youth today don't know what war is, or how sad war is," she said.

Montenegro hopes the new Sandinista government will share this sentiment, and assist her in maintaining the Galería de Héroes y Mártires.

The museum's displays include fallen soldiers' clothing, hand-printed texts telling the timeline of Estelí's liberation, and colorful portraits and quotes of revolutionary leaders.

Mixed in with the revolutionary memorabilia are the bright pastel stickers and banners from Ortega's successful presidential campaign last year. And the campaign message of peace and reconciliation has resonated powerfully with Montenegro.

"Before we needed a revolution, but now it's different," she says. "Now we want peace, only peace."

Estelí's Galería de Héroes y Mártires is open Monday through Friday, from 9 a.m.-5 p.m. It is located one block south of the Cathedral. ■

León Faces Managua in Baseball Championship

League-leading Bóer of Managua, with a record of 32-20, will square off this week against second-place León, 29-23, in the seven-game final series of the Nicaraguan Professional Baseball League (LNBP).

The final match up will feature some of the best talent in the league; León's star pitcher Aristides Sevilla, with a league-leading 8-2 record and a phenomenal 2.28 Earned-Run Average (ERA), will square off against Bóer's hard-throwing Juan Figueroa,

who has a perfect 6-0 record and an unhit-table 0.55 ERA.

Sevilla was scouted all season by the Kansas City Royals, and reportedly by the Cincinnati Reds and the Boston Red Sox.

At the plate, León will look to its superstar Justo Rivas, a former Atlanta Braves prospect who is the leading candidate for MVP this year, with a league-leading .377 batting average and eight homeruns.

Bóer, meanwhile, will look to the big bat of U.S. slugger Clyde Williams, a minor-league prospect for the Washington Nationals who topped the league with 13 homeruns and a monstrous .623 slugging

percentage.

Not qualifying for the finals this year are the Chinandega Tigers, who finished third with a record of 23-29, and San Fernando de Masaya, who stumbled to a finish with a disappointing 20-32, despite some brief moments of brilliance.

Games One and Two of the finals started this week in León, and then come back to Managua for Game Three and Four tonight (6 p.m.) and Feb. 3 (4 p.m.). If necessary, Game Five will be in León Feb. 4 (11 a.m.), Game Six Feb. 6 in Managua (6 p.m.), and Game Seven Feb. 7 in Managua (6 p.m.).

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