

# HOPE FOR “LOS CHAVALITOS”

Told by Dick Russell

**Inside a classroom** on New York City’s Upper East Side, affluent teenagers more used to sarcastic repartee listen in awe to their Spanish teacher, Alejandro Obando. In a slide show, they see the grateful faces of three hundred Nicaraguan families who now have running water, thanks to a project organized by their teacher with their New York neighbors. Modeled after the teachings of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr., the Manhattan Country School sister-city program offers students opportunities to make a difference in the world.

One student, Daniel Eddy, listens attentively as his teacher shares his dream. After teaching Spanish in New York for seven years, Alejandro is going home. His heart is aching for *los chavalitos*, the homeless children who live on the streets of Nicaragua, hustling trinkets and stolen goods. They sit together in alleyways, sniffing glue. Sometimes they sell their own bodies just to live.

This is what twelve long years of war will do to a country’s children. More than six thousand Nicaraguan children are orphaned and homeless. Thousands more, lucky enough not to have lost their parents, work long hours at menial jobs to help support their families. Eighty-five percent of Nicaragua’s children under the age of fifteen live in poverty.

Alejandro, too, grew up destitute in central Nicaragua. He, too, sold fake watches and shined shoes to survive. His parents divorced when he was a baby, and placed him in the care of his grandmother Celia, who

scraped out a meager living selling fried bananas. But she hoped for something better for her grandson, and insisted that he read books instead of hanging out at the pool hall.

Under the Somoza dictatorship, Alejandro and the other children in little towns like Camoapa were denied education after grade school. So the boy and his grandmother made their way to Managua, looking for jobs and an education. The little money he made selling lottery tickets was enough to pay his tuition at night school. One day a doctor from his hometown found him on the streets; if Alejandro would sweep the school, he said, he could be among its first nineteen high-school students. Alejandro happily accepted the offer.

After he graduated, Alejandro was fortunate enough to receive a baseball scholarship to a Managua university. Working part-time, he made enough money to travel to New York with his baseball teammates, but more than playing ball, he wanted to teach. He left Nicaragua to study at Columbia University, but he never forgot his people and he looked for ways to help those in need in his homeland.

Alejandro is now an American citizen with big dreams—and the Manhattan Country School is helping him make his dreams come true. Alejandro asked his students if they would help him create a farm-school for abandoned children. He wanted to bring some hope to a poor town and give its children the second chance he was once given. “This was a ray of light in a war-torn land,” Daniel recalls. “There was no way to hear him speak without wanting to help him.”

School administrators arranged donations of clothing and school supplies. Friends of the school and cultural organizations raised funds.

Several alumni traveled to Nicaragua during the summer to help build dormitories and classrooms. One of Alejandro's first Spanish students volunteered to spend an entire year there to help set up the curriculum. A baseball field built by Alejandro and a group of American volunteers awaits the debut of its first team. The school opened in the town where Alejandro was born.

“Over the next five years, I want to create a rich life for fifty homeless Nicaraguan children,” he says. “Together we will live on a three-hundred-acre countryside farm with a clear-running stream and wildlife like monkeys and deer. Here children will learn how to read and write, how to grow their own food, and how to be leaders. The older children will teach the younger ones.”

Back in New York City, Alejandro's students write him letters. “What you are doing is hard. We miss you, but we're proud of you. I want to come help you during my summer vacation,” one wrote.

“I cried when I received their letters—offering to organize raffles and bake sales to buy the children pencils and supplies,” says Alejandro. “The human heart knows no geographic boundaries.”

At the school's opening ceremony, some twenty children stood together in a large circle. Their eyes brimming with hope, each one planted a small tree. “I want to teach the children to preserve the beauty of this land,” Alejandro says. “I hope to accomplish what my grandmother always told me,” he says. “Be a good citizen, get your education, and help other people.”

*Education makes people easy to lead, but difficult to drive; easy to govern, but impossible to enslave.*

HENRY BROGHAM

Bring hope to the **Los Chavalitos School** in Nicaragua by volunteering; call Ginny Scheer at the Manhattan Country School Farm, 607-326-7049. Send tax-deductible donations to Friends of Los Chavalitos, c/o Boyda Law Office, P.O. Box 207, Marysville, KS 66508; e-mail [bayardgonzalez@yahoo.com](mailto:bayardgonzalez@yahoo.com).