

The Life of Carlos Herrada Aguilar

Carlos Herrada Aguilar is a teacher/principal/potter who lives in the small town of San Juan del Oriente, a town well known for its pottery in Nicaragua. His house is off to the side of an unpaved, steep road. He does not own a car. He and his wife, Luisa, have three children, ages 9, 7 & 3. They are poorly dressed in donated clothing. Their house is made out of cement block and consists of one large room for living and sleeping, one room containing the potter's wheel, one room containing the kiln for firing the pottery and displaying it. The small kitchen is outdoors, under a tin and cane roof. There is neither a stove nor a refrigerator. Luisa cooks on an outdoor iron grill, which is supported by huge boulders. Ingredients for meals are purchased at the market daily. There are very few dishes, silverware, or glasses. The family does not have a kitchen table to sit down and eat together. A few mattresses lie on the floor behind curtains in the room with the potter's wheel. Like most Nicaraguan families that live in poverty, the parents don't have the luxury of having a bedroom apart from their children. There isn't any other furniture for storing clothes, shoes, or other items. There is very little natural light, due to an absence of windows; and the walls and floors are unpainted cement. The main room contains a small, old-fashioned TV and few folding chairs. No other furniture is visible. Finally, the bathroom is an outhouse fashioned out of a kind of plastic wrapping around poles. The toilet itself is a huge cement block with a hole in it. Lime is used to disintegrate waste. Carlos has been a teacher for 22 years. He does not have a university degree, as a high school degree is all that is required for elementary school teachers in Nicaragua. He is passionate about his profession, however, and interested in learning the newest research about teaching and learning. He is now serving as the principal of the "Jesus El Buen Maestro" School, a small, dilapidated building about one quarter of a mile from his house. After two years, another teacher from the school will be designated to be the principal. Carlos begins work by 7:00 a.m. and is finished by 12:30 p.m. Carlos makes approximately \$1,000 cordobas per month, which equals \$71 US. (The base salary for teachers is \$800 cordobas per month, or \$57. Teachers receive a \$10 cordoba increase, or \$0.70, for each year of service). At 1:30, Carlos leaves school as the second shift of teachers and upper grade students arrive. Carlos must now dedicate himself to his second job, making pottery, since \$71 US per month is not enough to meet the basic needs of his family. Luisa is the main potter, and Carlos takes the pottery to fairs on the weekends to sell.

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Carlos and Luisa are committed to their work and their children. They want their children to obtain a good education. It is an intense daily struggle to find the money needed to send them to school with the required supplies (uniforms, notebooks, and pencils at the elementary level) while at the same time meeting the basic bills for food, clothing, transportation, and electricity. Carlos and Luisa also don't want their children to have to resort to selling items on the street in order to meet the family's basic needs. Among those Nicaraguan children who attend school (many never go at all), a good number must work before or after school to help their families survive. The most common work is selling items (gum, lollipops, bags of peanuts, ceramic vases, etc.) by the basketfull by walking for hours through the streets of the town trying to find customers. The Herrada Aguilar family is dedicated to work, school, studies, and home life in order to create a brighter future for their children. There is no time or money left for recreation. San Juan de Oriente consists of a string of small houses similar to that of Carlos and Luisa, most of which are owned by families of potters. There is nothing else to do there, and it is expensive to travel to Masaya or Managua even though they aren't that far away. One has to stand on the highway and wait for a passing bus (old school buses from the U.S. serve as the main mode of transportation in Nicaragua) to travel from town to town. The buses can be very crowded, and the pace is slow as they make many stops along the way.

Carlos and Luisa continue their struggle on a daily basis. In 2000, San Juan de Oriente suffered an earthquake that damaged nearly all the pottery kilns in the town as well as the pottery that was ready for sale. International aid helped to bring the potter business back to life. In addition, a youth group from Deep Creek, Maryland, helped the Herrada Aguilar family to build a cement walkway up the hill from the road to their property (keeping them from walking in the mud), as well as a big room to keep the pottery that is for sale.

Carlos is concerned about his children's future and how he will afford to pay for their basic supplies to keep them in school. He also worries about paying for transportation to the nearest secondary school once they have completed the sixth grade. He does not think about vacations, cars, new furniture, nice clothes, dinners in restaurants, or buying the latest computer gadgets. His immediate concern is to win the daily struggle to feed, shelter, and educate his family on the limited income he earns as a teacher and the "extra" that he and his wife earn as potters.
