

Through Nicaraguan Eyes: Struggles and Values

Objectives

As a result of this lesson, students will be able to:

- Analyze the daily challenges faced by two Nicaraguans from different walks of life.
 - Infer and list perceptions about the values of these two people.
 - Describe underemployment and its impact on family life.
-

Materials

- Student Handout: **The Life of Carlos Herrada Aguilar**
 - Student Handout: **The Life of Graciela Guzman Romero**
-

Activities

1. Divide the students into pairs
 - a. Distribute the student handout entitled **The Life of Carlos Herrada Aguilar** to half the pairs, and the student handout entitled **The Life of Graciela Guzman Romero** to the other half of the pairs.
 - b. Direct the students to read their description aloud with their partner.
 - c. Instruct students to prepare a written paraphrase of the description that they read.
 - d. Select a few pairs to share their paraphrases aloud.
 2. Lead a short discussion to define what “values” are.
 - a. Ask students to continue working in their pairs to infer and record in a list what they perceive to be the values of these two Nicaraguans.
 - b. Have students share aloud the values lists that they generated. (The teacher can paraphrase similar value statements on the chalkboard or on a transparency.)
 3. Ask students to refer to the written descriptions and identify aloud the top 3 challenges that Carlos and Graciela face on a daily basis. (**Note:** the goal is to get them to mention working too hard without sufficient pay to meet basic survival needs.)
 - a. Guide students to define the concept of “underemployment.”
 - b. Lead a discussion in which students explain how working so hard for substandard pay affects the family lives of both Carlos and Graciela.
 4. Concluding Activity:
 - a. Assign students to write a comparison between their own family’s life and the lives of these two families to demonstrate how the standard of living is directly linked to earning power.
 - b. **Option:** Ask students to share their writings and lead a discussion on what they believe would have to occur in Nicaragua for Carlos and Graciela to attain more just employment and a higher standard of living for their families.
-

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.

Continued on next page

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.

The Life of Graciela Guzman_Romero

Graciela lives in Chinandega, Nicaragua, where she has lived her entire life. Chinandega is a small town near the city of Leon. Graciela has five children. The father of her children is a dockworker. He and Graciela were never married. He also drank excessively during their years together, and was verbally abusive to Graciela and her children. Sometimes he was even violent.

Graciela raised her children on the meager earning of her husband (or what was left after the amount he spent on alcohol, approximately \$600 cordobas a month—about \$43 US. Her husband did not permit her to work outside of their home. They lived in a small, three-room cement block house with very sparse belongings—a few chairs and mattresses on the floor. They did not have indoor plumbing although they had electricity. Graciela made wood fires outside to prepare meals. The family had never been to the movies nor taken a vacation. Life was about the daily struggle to eat and to stay in school.

One day when her son, Alejandro, was twelve, he needed a notebook to be permitted to complete the current semester at his school (in Nicaragua, school is “free,” but children must pay for their uniforms, notebooks, and textbooks in secondary school). Graciela had no money and told Alejandro to ask his father, who turned him away saying that school was a waste of money. Alejandro, an excellent student who had already won many academic certificates, was desperate to continue school. Graciela found a one-cordoba coin in her purse, purchased a few sheets of wrapping paper, cut them into squares, and sewed a notebook for Alejandro. When Alejandro was thirteen, he was selected as one of the top students in the nation to be sent to Pittsburgh, PA, to play baseball with little league teams in Pittsburgh in a special home-stay visit and tournament arranged by KDKA radio! He spent two weeks in Pittsburgh in the summer of 1994, and began a friendship with a Pittsburgh family that continues to this day.

Finally, after years of living with a man who was often drunk and unreliable, Graciela asked the father of her children to leave. She found another small, cement house in an equally poor neighborhood of Chinandega where she currently lives. She does not feel very safe in this neighborhood as gangs of teenagers are often on the street sniffing glue. Sometimes these teenagers act menacing and ask for money. Graciela’s daughter, Lucrecia, who lives nearby, is afraid to be home alone.

Continued on next page

Graciela found herself faced with the dilemma of trying to provide for her children while at the same time helping them to continue their education. She has always believed that education is the only way for her children to escape lives of dire poverty like hers. With a sixth grade education and no particular skills, Graciela fought to earn enough money to support her family by creating her own “micro businesses,” such as cleaning and washing for others, buying and reselling household items, making desserts to sell, and cooking for families having large parties. Finally, with help from her relatives in New York and her friends in Pittsburgh, she has been able to stay afloat by selling basic necessities out of her home, like eggs, sugar, toilet paper, laundry and dish soap, etc.

One night, Graciela saw an advertisement on their small, black and white television for scholarships to study in a university in Cuba being offered to excellent Nicaraguan high school students. Miriam woke up Alejandro, and took him on a long bus journey to Managua to the Cuban Embassy the next day, the last day to apply. Graciela and Alejandro waited in a line several blocks long for Alejandro’s turn to submit his application. Graciela continued to call the Cuban Embassy everyday for a few weeks. One morning, a car pulled up in front of their house, and a man delivered a message that Alejandro had been selected and needed to be ready to go to Cuba in three days! He would receive a full scholarship and the University of Havana as long as he kept good grades! Alejandro, who was facing a future without further education or a job in Chinandega, was ecstatic. He is now in his fourth year of medical school in Cuba, and has helped his brother, Oscar, to secure a scholarship as well. Oscar is studying sports medicine.

Graciela has suffered many tragedies along the way—one daughter was treated for tuberculosis and another lost an eye in a sudden accident, resulting in the need to purchase a false eye and glasses to strengthen the good eye. Graciela herself has been in the hospital for heart problems related to stress. She does not have any health insurance. At one point, her daughter was told to leave the clinic, because they could not afford to pay for the bed. The TB medicine and false eye cost more money than Graciela makes in a year.

In spite of her difficulties, Graciela’s faith in God and love for her children has sustained her through the years. She believes that God will provide what her family needs, and that one must always be grateful for what one has. She is a strong woman who refuses to relinquish her hope for a better future for her children and grandchildren. She has been and continues to be a solid rock for her family through their many struggles, always counting on God and their love for each other to meet the future with hope and anticipation for a better life.
