

History of Zelaya Blandón Family

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North South Studies

Dawson College

Nicaragua Field Trip 2005 - 2006

In memory of Paula Cruz Morales, who
passed away February 18, 2011

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Notes for 2018 Edition

I decided to make a new digital and printed edition of *History of the Zelaya Blandón Family*, published for the first time in Montreal in 2006 in the context of a research project carried out by Dawson College North South Studies students, for two reasons. First, because thanks to the Internet it is possible to publish a book, both as an eBook and in paperback, at zero publishing costs. Second, and more importantly, because I am fully aware of the fact that History with a capital H is based fundamentally on history with a lowercase h; in other words, in events experienced, perceived, and told by concrete individuals, however imperfect and incomplete these accounts may be.

In this research project, those being researched become, through their effort to remember and present a global picture of past events of their life, not only co-researchers but also the main researchers.

This edition of 2018 is identical to the 2006 edition, except for the following:

- On May 18, 2014, Amalia del Cid published a beautiful article about José Francisco Zelaya Mejía in the Nicaraguan national newspaper La Prensa. I reproduced this article, “The Patriarch of Cinco Pinos”, in Appendix 1.
- On September 5, 2004, Mario Fulvio Espinosa published an article in the same La Prensa about the ‘trápiche’, the 100 year old cattle driven mill still used by José Francisco Zelaya Mejía to extract juice from sugar cane. I reproduced this article, “The sugarcane juice boils, swirls, and foams...” in Appendix 2.

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- In December 2006, after distributing a copy of the results of our research project to each member of the Zelaya Blandón family, we received, a few days later, a beautiful letter of thanks signed individually by each of them. I reproduced the letter in Appendix 3.

A few weeks ago, I was talking on the telephone with Elmer Zelaya Blandón about the 22 solar panels that he just installed - 10 in Paso Hondo and 12 in Las Pozas - to provide electricity to the pump of their respective water grids (a project made possible thanks to the generous donation of the Roncalli International Foundation to North South Studies). In the course of our conversation, I asked him to see if each member of his family would agree to republish, this time on the Internet and with Amazon, the document *History of the Zelaya Blandón Family*. He did, and everyone agreed.

I hope that the profound revolutionary spirit of the Sandinista revolution, that transpires in much of *History of Zelaya Blandón Family*, will allow Nicaraguans to overcome, in a peaceful and positive way, the dramatic events being experienced by their country in the last two months: anti Ortega government protests resulting in 215 deaths and more than 1,000 wounded¹.

Ovide Bastien

On June 22, 2018

The translation of the book from Spanish to English was done by the author.

¹ See [Dos meses de crisis en Nicaragua: Muertes, destrucción e inseguridad](#). By José Denis Cruz, El Nuevo Diario, June 21, 2018.

Foreword

During each field trip in Nicaragua, students of North-South Studies – a social science profile at Dawson College in Montreal, carry out a small research project. During the December 2005 field trip, a group of students decided to write, with the help of two of their teachers, Christina Chough and me, the story of one of the most influential families in the Cinco Pinos region, that of José Francisco Zelaya Mejía and Paula Cruz Blandón Morales.

At the beginning of October 2005, we emailed asking the family if they accepted our project. The family answered yes, and with great enthusiasm.

In the following days, we sent a list of questions to each of the eight siblings in the family, five sons and three daughters. We asked them to write their autobiography, answering as much as possible each question and completing with other information, according to their inspiration.

Five sent us texts by email before our departure from Montreal on December 15, 2005; the three others - Thelma, Nellys and Elmer - after our return to Montreal on January 14, 2006.

During our stay in families in the region of Cinco Pinos (from December 17 to January 1), the students, with the help of Christina who did the translation from Spanish to English, interviewed the father, José, the mother, Paula, the eldest son, Ariel, and the youngest daughter, Nellys. Each interview was held at the family's house, in El Espino, a house that also serves as a corner store.

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The father, José Zelaya Blandón

We published in April 2006 a summary in English of the history of the family, based on the autobiographical texts sent by each sibling and the interviews carried out during our trip. This summary appears in “Field Trip Report Nicaragua, 2005-2006”.

In this publication, we reproduce the integral texts written by each of the eight children, and a summary of the notes taken by the students during the interviews. We include the

questions prepared by the students for the interviews. We also incorporate some photos.

Telling the story of a family, especially a family as impressive as the Zelaya Blandón family, represents a daunting yet rewarding task. When writing their autobiographies and recalling the trials and hardships, as well as the profound joys of the revolution, all were emotional. During our interview with Nellys, a beautiful and amazingly powerful exchange, she broke into tears from time to time; and some of us were also in tears. When Thelma wrote her testimony, she could not, at times, hold back her tears, so deep and moving were her memories.



The mother, Paula Cruz Blandón Morales

We wanted to interview more members of the family, but time and circumstances unfortunately did not allow it. The day that Edelberto traveled from Cinco Pinos to El Espino for the interview, the students asked me to explain to him that they did not have the energy to continue with the interviews. Because of the intensity of the previous

encounter with Nellys, an encounter whose wealth words simply cannot convey, the students were completely exhausted emotionally.

We are deeply honored that the members of the Zelaya Blandón family have opened their hearts to us, foreigners who know little about Nicaragua. We hope that what follows, even if very modest, does not betray the trust they have placed in us.

Ovide Bastien, December 8, 2006.

Research Team:

Christina Chough, Spanish teacher,
Ovide Bastien, Economics teacher
Natasha Chenier, student
Marion Dulude, student
Andrea Grant, student
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Kyra Wilcock, student

Thanks to:

- Maria-Fernanda Benavides and Beatriz Gómez for reviewing the Spanish version of the document.
- Lorena Perron who improved the quality of some of the photos.
- And especially to all the members of the Zelaya Blandón family for their kind collaboration.

N.B. It is possible that we made mistakes taking notes during the interviews. For these errors and inaccuracies, we apologize.

Interview with Paula Cruz Blandón Morales, 74 years old

Notes taken by Kyra Wilcock

I was born on April 28, 1933, in the Estelí region. I have three brothers and two sisters. One of my brothers died when he had seven children. Another sister of mine lives in the United States. All the others live in Nicaragua: Isidoro, Vespaciano and Juana Mercedes. During this Christmas period in December 2005, we the siblings all met for the first time in the history of the family. Here in El Espino.

My mom died when I was only 9 years old. I married José Francisco Zelaya when I was 17 years old. We got married in Cinco Pinos, in front of a judge. My dad acted as a witness. In the following days, our union was blessed in an evangelical church.

I lived with my husband on a farm, not far from here in El Espino. To help my family financially, I learned how to sew and started selling clothes in Cinco Pinos. The children helped me, many times, by sewing buttons on the clothes.

During the harvest period, we had up to 12 employees on our farm. It was my responsibility to prepare food for them, houseclean, wash their clothes and ensure their supervision. I had an assistant. In harvest time, that is to say for three months, I had to start working very early each morning, from Monday to Saturday (On Sunday, the workers could visit their families). I rested after supper, but I had to get up to serve food to Jose and the workers who arrived later in the evening. When I managed to go to sleep, it was midnight, and sometimes later. I remember that many times, because of lack of sleep and overwork, I cried.

In the other periods of the year, life was more relaxed.

To allow the children to pursue their education, we decided to move into a house owned by my own family in Estelí. One day, a few months before the triumph of the revolution, I remember when Somoza's National Guard entered our house and arrested Edelberto and Julián for being involved in the Sandinista Front. They were imprisoned for a few days. In those days, one simply did not know whether one would ever again see someone detained by the National Guard. One could hear the military constantly flying with their planes non-stop; it was very difficult to sleep at night. The situation was so hard that we decided to leave Estelí. We lost our house.

In the 1980s, the National Guard (the Contra) entered my brother's house, Vespaciano, and shot two of his sons. He survived, but with injuries. He still has a bullet embedded in his head, is totally deaf on one side and cannot see with one of his eyes. The National Guard invaded his house because they suspected that the family was involved in Sandinista activities (As Paula was speaking, Vespaciano, who was visiting his sister and attending the interview, but from a certain distance, was listening discreetly).

When I was a kid I could not go to school. I learned to read only when Ariel started going to school. José, my husband, had gone to primary school for three years as a child.

Thanks to the National Literacy Crusade, José has been able to advance another three years and even pass grade six. Later, he continued studying. I did not have the opportunity to study, because I spent all my time tending to the children and sewing clothes to allow them to go to school. To this day I am unable to write. All I can do is sign my name. I can read a little, but with difficulty.



The trapiche, extracting juice from sugar cane on the farm La Caldera

My dream always was to allow each of one of my sons and daughters to pursue their schooling, if, of course, they wanted to. I did not want the lack of money to be an obstacle to their education. Of all my children, it was Julian who studied the most faithfully. However, it is Elmer who ended up pursuing his studies the most, even though as a child he did not take his studies seriously and spent a lot of time playing cards. Edelberto is still pursuing his studies, and so are Lester and Domitila.

(At this point in the interview, Paula, who was trying to recall a past event but did not manage to, called upon her son Ariel, who was elsewhere in the house, to come and help her. However, as soon as Ariel showed up our interview with Paula virtually ended. What follows is from Ariel, not Paula)

Comment by Ariel:

As an eldest son, I had a lot of responsibility. For example, I had the responsibility of punishing my brothers and my sisters when they misbehaved. I always liked studying and was always fond of books. And I tried to transmit that same love to my children.

I am very proud of the huge impact my family, though of humble origin, had on this community in El Espino.

In the entire region of Cinco Pinos, there was only one other family in which all the children managed to obtain university level schooling. However, it was not a peasant family, the mother in this family was a teacher, and the family was wealthier.



*Nellys, Thelma, Lester, Domitila, Elmer, Julián, Edelberto, Ariel
The father, José, and the mother, Paula*

Interview with José Francisco Zelaya Mejía, 81 years old

I was born on March 26, 1926 in the district of Pavón, Cinco Pinos. When I was two years old, my dad started living with another woman. After that my mom moved to El Espino with her children. My sister helped the family. When my mom died on January 1, 1931, my uncle is the one who helped us survive.

I married Paula when I was 24 years old. After the wedding, we lived in El Espino, on a farm, for 14 years, producing various crops - sesame seeds, rice, cotton, beans, etc., and sugar cane. My economic situation was not very different from that of most of the people in the region.

I never did know my grandparents, who were of Honduran origin. However, I know that my grandfather was a military leader in Honduras. Many people in this region of Cinco Pinos come from Honduras. Due to the lack of food in Honduras, years ago, many moved to Nicaragua in search of food. And many of them stayed in Nicaragua.

I have eight children. The first six were born in El Espino; the other two, in Cinco Pinos.

On March 12, 1964, my wife and children began living in a house in Cinco Pinos. I spent a lot of time working the land on the farm; I would regularly travel on horseback back and forth from the farm to Cinco Pinos.

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José, in front of the radio transmitter in the APRODESE Centro de Capacitación

Shortly after marrying Paula, I became involved in a certain amount of commercial activity. I would buy several commodities in Santo Tomas - for example, earthenware, grain seed, oranges, etc. - and travel long distances with oxen to sell them. I even went many times all the way to Chinandega. For three-day trips that were very long and difficult, we traveled at night to avoid the excessive heat of the day. We took a trip every two weeks. Traveling was very hard. We used kerosene lanterns to see at night. In the Chinandega region, I would buy empty boxes, boxes that came from the mines. And once I was back in El Espino I would sell the more expensive boxes to make money. Thanks to this trade, I was able to buy, little by little, the material needed for the construction of a house in Cinco Pinos.

I have never smoked, and I do not drink alcohol.

I always liked managing workers in the field, but now I am no longer able to work in the field with the machete as before.

To keep my energy, I manage our corner store. I also like to spend time on the Internet.

Many years ago, there were all kinds of fruit trees in this region. Trees that grew naturally: mangoes, papayas, oranges, etc. People in those days were not hungry. Of course, there were sometimes problems caused by excess water, mice, etc. However, traveling to Chinandega nowadays is much easier than in the past. Much easier.

In 1926, there were only two families living in El Espino. Our hamlet developed a lot over time. The children of the families built houses, and settled down in the region little by little, working the land.

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I always worked to ensure the education of my children. My oldest son, Ariel, eventually went to Chinandega to continue his education.

The revolution helped us a lot for the education of our children. Today, it is more difficult for families from this point of view.

During the revolution, there was a great sense of solidarity among the people in the communities of this region. A solidarity that went beyond political differences.

Somoza's National Guard once came here in search of Edelberto. Our neighbors lied to them, and that probably that saved Edelberto's life. 'Being brothers and sisters means helping one another'.



From left to right: Dalí, Chavelo, Hermelinda, Elmer, and Don José.

Testimony of Ariel, 55 years old

I am José Ariel Zelaya Blandón and was born in El Espino, Cinco Pinos, department of Chinandega, on June 12, 1951. I am 55 years old. I currently live in Chinandega 130 km from the capital Managua. I live with my family, my wife Lic. Marta Lorena Carrero Trejos and our five children:

From the youngest to the oldest:

1. Karen Lucia Licensed, Biologist, 31 years old.
2. Carolina del Carmen, Psychologist, 29 years old.
3. José Ariel, Engineer, 24 years old.
4. María Lorena, primary school teacher and in her first year at the Universidad Nacional Autónoma de Nicaragua (UNAN) León, 20 years old
5. Denis Francisco, graduating in industrial mechanics and preparing to enter university, 18 years old.

All of them Zelaya Carrero. Of my children, three work and two are students. Karen currently lives in Spain; she emigrated in search of work, because in our country the crisis is tremendous.

Description of family life

I was born in El Espino, Cinco Pinos. I grew up with my parents on the farm surrounded by workers (farm workers) and things typical of peasants: carts, cows, oxen, horses, etc.

Despite the discomforts of rural life in our hamlet at that time and the lack of basic services, I was very happy. From a very early age, I began to realize that all humans are equal and deserve to be treated the same way. However, society has developed social classes. Through the

awareness we developed during the revolution, we learned never to stay still before the suffering of others.

My first schooling was in a Protestant church; then I went to the Espino school and then to the Cinco Pinos urban school about 7 km from our farm. Many times on foot, and sometimes on horseback.

As I found this very taxing, my father sent me to live with my very dear uncle Humberto Basilio Zelaya. A man who was an unconditional friend of the Cuban revolution and who was one of our first examples of a revolutionary.

In my region, El Espino, there were only two radios: one where our 'political' uncle Juancito Osorio Baquedano - Milton's dad – lived, and one in my house that my father had bought. These two transistor radios were constantly transmitting news from the Cuban radio station "Radio Havana", free territory of America. All this was developing our revolutionary consciousness.

When my brothers were ready to go to the school in Cinco Pinos, my father built a house there and my mother went to live in that town to take care of us. My father was left alone on the farm. On Fridays, we would return to the farm to help our dad.

During all this period of my youth, I was happy, playing baseball, working, studying and visiting girlfriends.

In 1960 I was sent to study at the Joaquín Sansón Escoto Institute. Today it is called the Autonomous National Institute of Chinandega. I was 17 years old and in 1972 I graduated with the dream of going to university; however, because of the earthquake and I did not study in 1973 but only the following year. I studied marketing from 1974 – 1978 and completed an economics statistics course.

Because of the insurrection of September 1978, I did not graduate.

After the triumph of the Sandinista Revolution, I continued my studies at UNAN León and I graduated with a degree in education science, with an honors in social science. I studied marketing four years, statistics for two, and education sciences for five years; I have also studied philosophy, political economy and participated in workshops on the process of the revolution. I have always been fond of books.

I am currently the owner and director of a high school that offers morning classes on weekdays and on Saturdays. I am also the director of a public high school that offers afternoon classes.

I have held various jobs in my life: insurance salesman and vendor of encyclopedias; from 1975 - 1978 I worked as a pollster, first only part-time and later full time in an office; social studies surveys on health projects, families, marketing, etc. Before the revolution I was in charge of collecting payments for a car distributor, and after the revolution I assumed various tasks assigned to me by the government: literacy work, and union work in the 'Central Sandinista de los Trabajadores'. In 1980 I worked in Río San Juan as responsible for social welfare. In 1986 I worked for agricultural cooperatives. In 1993 I was responsible for COTEJOS in the Regional Electoral Council, preparing the first phase of the creation of identity cards.

The revolution was a process of struggle that at one point took us by surprise. The first thing I remember is the flight of Somoza and his relatives, in caravans of planes, and then the entrance in Managua of thousands of combatants, the arrival of the 'Junta de Gobierno' (Government Junta)

to León, and, the most sensational thing for me, meeting classmates with whom I had studied at university. Many combatants would arrive at my house asking about their family and friends.

Another pleasant memory was meeting my brother, Elmer, who participated in a brigade that was arriving from Colombia where he was studying. A friend found me in one of the commandos in Chinandega and informed me that my brother Elmer was in Managua. I immediately went to Managua and to meet him and many friends; our joy was mutual because he had been told that I had been killed in New Guinea.

All these memories, and the hope we felt for a better future, are unforgettable. The poor and voiceless, so long crushed by both political and economic powers, were finally being treated as persons.

Students from all levels were deeply involved in the defeat of Somoza, sometimes carrying out small tasks such as delivering a message to someone, and sometimes grabbing a gun and going underground.

At the beginning I got involved in university in the Revolutionary Student Front (FER) working, helping in propaganda, distributing leaflets on the buses in Managua, helping to carry parcels, even occupying churches. In Estelí, I constructed barricades with my friends, kept watch, etc., basically a lot of things to advance the struggle. Later, I delivered packages to many different places, Matagalpa, Estelí, Honduras etc.

After the triumph I participated in reserve battalions since I do not like military life. Then I cooperated with a group of workers in forming the Sandinista Confederation of Workers, and then in carrying out literacy work that had been entrusted to this confederation in the so-called

Workers Literacy Militia (MOA or Milicias Obreros Alfabetizadores).

Later I worked for the government as a state employee and also joined an agricultural cooperative in the municipality of Villanueva working with UNAG. I participated in adult education projects, and in different tasks whose purpose was always to improve the well-being of others, especially the poorest. I will continue with that revolutionary conscience.



The revolution continues

Testimony of Edelberto, 53 years old

I'm Edelberto Zelaya Blandón. We were born in the hamlet El Espino, municipality of Cinco Pinos, department of Chinandega, on June 29, 1953 (I said 'we' were born because I was a twin; my twin brother, called Adalberto, died at 14 days old). I am 53 years old.

I currently live in Cinco Pinos in the urban sector located one block east of the courthouse. Cinco Pinos is 230 km from the capital Managua and 230 km from Tegucigalpa, capital of Honduras.

I am the second child of the marriage of José Francisco Zelaya Mejía and Paula Cruz Blandón Morales.

I'll now attempt to rewind the cassette. It's not easy, but I'll try.

I can say and with great certainty that my life as a young man was very happy because of the very fact that I grew up with my parents and that I still have them alive today.

What I remember as a child is that I started my education at the Espino school; my first teacher was my uncle José Francisco Zelaya Izaguirre, brother of Ursulino Zelaya (Dalí's father). He would walk to that little school either from the house in Espino or from La Caldera. It's in that school that I completed grades one and two.

Later I went to the school of Cinco Pinos and traveled daily 7 km one way and 7 km to come back. My mother was up at dawn to prepare our food, (I say 'our' because there were many of us: Ariel, Reynaldo, Julian, etc.). We left very early to be at school for 8 am because if we were late they would punish us. We would come back at 6 pm, often in the rain. I traveled this way for three years. In other words, when I was in grades 3, 4 and 5. After that

my parents built a house in Cinco Pinos and we moved there.

On weekends when I did not travel to school, I would help doing housework and many times in the field, plowing the land, cleaning the sugar cane field, cutting cotton; anything that had to be done.



Edelberto on his first horse

While living in Cinco Pinos, we had to go to the mountain to fetch firewood for the kitchen.

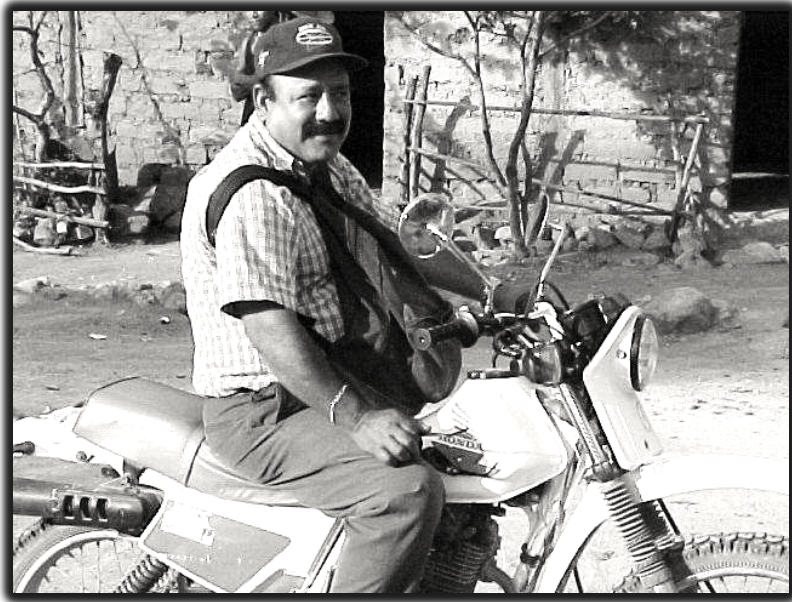
It is important to point out that from an early age I was taught to work and to respect others and private property, I was taught to be honest, to respect the elderly, to practice solidarity, etc.

In 1968 I passed into grade 5. It is then that I got my first pair of shoes. We always went barefoot to school, but with well ironed clothes. I am proud of the fact that despite the poverty in which we lived, we were always very well

dressed for the September 14 celebrations of the battle of San Jacinto and the independence of Nicaragua. That was possible because my mother worked as a seamstress and made shirts for a woman called Flora Lagos de Espinal; I used to help her sewing on buttons. She would make us white shirts and a tie and Juancito Baquedano (Milton's dad) would make our pants.

I remember when a mango fell on a plot of land next to the school, and a girl I liked asked me to go and get it for her. To impress her I crossed over the fence. However, the owner of this plot happened to see me and immediately went to complain to the director of the school. The director punished me by having me kneel in sand for two hours. Then he told my dad about it, and he also punished me.

Guess who owned this plot? None other than Don Paco Mondragón of Las Pozas!



Edelberto on his modern horse

After I finished my primary school, as Ariel was studying in Chinandega, I stayed home to work with my father on the farm. As he was then milling sugar cane with the trapiche for up to two months, I had to haul 18 loads of sugar cane on a mule from the field to the trapiche. And many times, the helper who was operating the trapiche did not show up for work, and so I also had to operate the trapiche. My father would replace me at dawn, so I could rest a bit and continue my work the next day.



In 1969 I went from Cinco Pinos to Chinandega to look for work and study and I lived where Ariel stayed. However, I could not hold on to the jobs I was obtaining because Ariel, who has a strong character, had zero tolerance when my bosses would insult me.

I then attended the La Salle Polytechnic Institute in León and passed the first and second year. However, always as indomitable, I abandoned school and went to Managua

after the 1972 earthquake where I would work during the day and attend classes at night.

By then, the FSLN was very active and students were being persecuted by the National Guard. I joined the High School Student Movement (MES), where we did political work in neighborhoods and schools, and occupied churches. I was imprisoned because they found me with some revolutionary pamphlets that we were distributing in the neighborhood. One of my co-workers, who happened to be a spy, accused me of another crime. And so the National Guard came to my workplace and arrested and detained me. Ariel did everything he could to prove my innocence. A member of the National Guard, who was from Cinco Pinos, also spoke in my favor. Without their intervention, I would not be telling this story.

One could say that my political work began in the 70s, though the seeds of my revolutionary conscience had been developing since I was very young, because of the anti-imperialist positions of my uncles, Humberto Basilio Zelaya, Ursulino and Juancito. I remember how they would spend all their time listening to Radio Habana Cuba, listening to the speeches of Fidel Castro, of Che Guevara, etc.

My wife's name is Carmen Hernández Espinoza. We have three daughters:

Eveling Ninets Zelaya Hernández, who was born on May 4, 1981. She is 25 years old, has a degree in Business Administration from UPONIC and is already married. Her husband is Alex Lezama, who is currently working in the United States. They have a beautiful 2 year-old girl, Ingrid Fernanda Lezama Zelaya, and she is living in my house.

Carmen Lisset Zelaya Hernández is my second daughter. She was born on May 12, 1982. She has already graduated with a degree in Psychology from UNIVAL de León. She

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is currently doing a post-graduate degree in psychology, she is already married, and her husband is Cesar Mendoza Corrales, a veterinarian. They have a girl.

Therefore, I am the grandfather of two girls. Their mothers are currently unemployed, doing small businesses to survive.

Jessica Mercedes Zelaya Hernandez is 16 years old and she is in her first year at the University of León. She is my tender one; I have her living in the house of Elmer in León. Her dream is to study pharmacy or medicine. She can decide for herself what she wants to do; I believe that parents should not force their children to study what they themselves; instead, they should leave them choose.

I can say that I am happy with my daughters.



Testimony of Julián, 49 years old

I'm Julián Zelaya Blandón, third brother of the 8 that we are. I'm 49 years old. I currently live in the department of Chinandega, Barrio Montserrat, half a block to the south. I have a degree in social sciences. I have six children, two out of wedlock and four who currently live at home.

Among my children, Eloísa is my first daughter; currently she has two girls. She is 26 years old. She was born in the beginning of the war in Nicaragua. She was born in León.

After the war of 1979, I joined the literacy crusade and am very proud of having taught two children to read and write. One of them is now a doctor and the other is a volcanologist; the latter was trained in the Czech Republic, sent by the revolution. I only found out this pleasant surprise a short time ago.

After participating in the literacy crusade, I traveled to the Republic of Germany to study for a year. There I befriended a woman from Finland who gave birth to my second child, Reino Sebastián Francisco Kupari Zelaya. This one lives in Finland. After doing his obligatory military service, he is currently studying medicine. He is married and has a son.

Later I returned to Nicaragua to resume my life with my beloved wife, Tania. She is an agronomist, currently director of an NGO called APRODER. With her we have four children: Yader and Uriel, who are currently doing university studies. Yader is studying food engineering; he is in his third year. Uriel is studying veterinary medicine; he is in his second year. My daughter Tania is in junior high school, and my daughter Nelis Socorro is currently in third grade.

I am happy, because they are all good students.

My life when young ... These were the happiest days of my life. My father, who was dedicated to agriculture, taught us farm work when we were not at school and during our vacations. To attend school in Cinco Pinos – after seeing to the mules and oxen that my father had for the production of candy from sugar cane – we had to travel on foot 7 kilometers. Sometimes we had to run hard to arrive on time. We had to be there by eight o'clock; many times, we did not have time to drink water.

Later, my father built a house in Cinco Pinos and we moved there so that it would be easier for us to attend school. Since my mom was a seamstress, she made shirts, dresses and pants. After doing our homework, we had an easier task: help her sew on buttons. I earned 25 cents per shirt, which was important to support us in our studies.

I managed to finish my six years of grade school. However, as there was no high school in Cinco Pinos, and seeing the difficulty our parents had as we were many children, my brother Edelberto and I decided to travel to Managua to work and study at the same time. We had to cope with great difficulties, because of the 1972 earthquake that had just destroyed Managua. In Managua, we would work in the day and study at night.

We also had to cope with immense political challenges as we felt compelled, as students, to get involved in the ongoing struggle against the Somoza regime. So difficult was our situation that when I was going to register for my 3rd year in high school, I could not even get the required 10 córdobas.

In order not to miss the school year, I started studying accounting. I spent two years studying and I received a degree in accounting.



Later, working and studying in Managua, we helped financially so that our younger brothers and sisters could pursue their studies. My mom had to move to Estelí with Lester, Domitila, and Thelma so that they could pursue their education. My grandfather had given her a house in Estelí where they lived. The trips in that time were to Estelí.

Edelberto had moved to Estelí to study his last year and had enrolled with other youth in the FSLN. I continued working in Managua.

When the war began in Estelí, my father and mother sent us to Jalapa where my mother's brother, Isidoro Blandón, lives. In Jalapa, we started planting some beans. The idea was to carry out a normal activity so that the National Guard would not start suspecting that we were up to something. However, we started contacting youth from Jalapa and developed deep bonds of trust with them as we listened to Radio Sandino. The war at this time was at its

height in Estelí, Managua, and Matagalpa. I remember that when the Front would prepare an ambush, my uncle would say, “dios primero nos vaya peor nosotros nos alegrábamos.” (this part I was unable to translate)

One day, around 5:00 PM, some National Guards approached us, and started hitting me because I supposedly appeared as the most dangerous. Because I was preparing corn in order to make a typical Nicaraguan dish called ‘atol’, I had a knife in my hand. The Guards detained us and threw us in jail, in a room whose stench was unbearable, and on whose walls one could see the names of comrades, for example "Manuel Cesar was here", comrades who had been killed at night after being detained. Apparently, they would throw the bodies into a volcano so as not to leave any traces.

My brother, Ariel, had gone to Estelí, in the very midst of the war of September '79. They did not know about us, nor did we about them. As the guards had erroneously killed, a few days earlier, youth who were not at all part of the guerrillas, we were spared; they did not kill us. Furthermore, my uncle had prestige in the sector, and the Somoza forces were already weak, because the revolution was advancing. So, they ended up giving us a house as a jail, that is, we had to report to the police station every day. That frightened us considerably.

After the September war, about September 20 or 25, my father arrived, and we decided to go to Estelí with him. In Estelí, one could see corpses on properties, and businesses and houses burned; being young, in those days, was a crime. At night, some neighbors of my mother's house had been taken from their house and murdered. At my mother's house, a compañero named Teodoro López had died at the beginning of the battle. Our mother told us that the National Guard wanted to kill Ariel, Domitila and Melania

and all the women saved Ariel. They say that the Domitila hugged a guard and bit the nerve in his ear.

Terrified by all that was happening, my dad, thanks to the help of an evangelical church, took us to Cinco Pinos. We had to cross many check points where we underwent a thorough search: our knees, our elbows, etc.; anyone caught with anything suspicious was immediately executed.

In Cinco Pinos, we had to emigrate once again, because the guards were searching for us in this town. They had killed five youth from Estelí who were traveling to Honduras. Some rescuers denounced them, and they were executed.

With all this, we traveled to some relatives in Honduras where I worked for a long time. All this, I am telling you because it is simply impossible to forget what one experienced as a youth during the intense moments of the insurrection.

After the war, everything was joy. I returned from Honduras and joined the great literacy crusade, an experience I referred to above. Then I studied at the La Salle Polytechnic Institute in Leon where I became a student representative and managed to become the national coordinator of high school students, and a member of the national youth council.

Two years later, in 1983, I was asked to head a delegation of students in Germany. There I studied economics and other important things.

Upon returning, I started working with the youth in Somotillo. Then in Chinandega.

Subsequently, I traveled to Finland for three years and my family grew. There, I cooperated with several Nicaragua solidarity committees.

History of Zelaya Blandón Family

When the elections came with Violeta Chamorro, I went back to work again, and we lost the elections. I spent a year working on my own as a merchant: selling cream, milk, meat, etc. until a friend gave me a job in an energy company where I worked for 16 years. I started as a collector, and then they gave me the responsibility as manager of the subsidiary in Somotillo.

I am currently a manager in the municipality of Viejo and completing 32 years of work experience.



Reforestation – Project of Asociación para el Desarrollo Socioeconómico del Espino (APRODESE)

Testimony of Elmer, 48 years old

I was born in the region of El Espino, Cinco Pinos, on January 1, 1959, the same year, same day, and same time that the Cuban revolution triumphed.

I was born in a poor but very nice family. Our parents instilled in us from very early the love of work, respect for others, responsibility, and honesty. Even though they were of evangelical tradition they never pressured us to follow their beliefs. We attended the services on Saturdays and Sundays because it was also our recreation area where we would meet other children and, once we were a little older, a place where we could find the girls that attracted us.

My parents taught me the basic tasks of the field: hoeing, cleaning, carrying firewood, gathering animals, cutting sugar cane, carrying water, going to school, beating beans, cutting wheat and hitting it to remove the chaff, taking care of rice and corn, planting vegetables, planting trees, etc. They instilled in us a deep love of nature.

In those times the rivers and streams had plenty of water and we learned to fish chacalines (small river shrimps), sardines, and fish. I learned to swim in the ravines of Las Pozas and Los Encuentros.

There was no latrine in our house and although our parents were always very worried about us, there were times of shortage where we ate tortillas with salt and my mother would mix the coffee with corn and sweeten it with sugar cane broth.

From a very young age I wanted to go to school and I remember crying because my brothers would not take me along when they went, because the teacher (my Uncle Pancho) said that I was too young.

I remember once getting a beating from my dad for lying. As a matter of fact, I had only lied to protect myself and my brothers. We went with Milton, Reynaldo and my older brothers and I remember that we climbed a few swings and crossed over an abyss from one side to the other (at a height of about thirty meters) to get some wild apples. An accident would have been fatal. My father saw us and asked us where we had been. And for lying to him he punished me with the sash.

My brothers would travel to Cinco Pinos to go to school to attend higher grades of primary school.

As education progressed, my parents made a house in Cinco Pinos so that we would no longer have to travel the long distance from El Espino to Cinco Pinos.

What follows is a typical day (especially when it was time to mill sugar cane in La Caldera):

- 04:00 Bathing in the creek of La Caldera. A terrible cold !! Bathing every day is a deeply rooted custom in Nicaragua.
- 04:00 Breakfast - coffee with donuts or tortillas with beans
- 05:00 Hike to Cinco Pinos on the big hill (sometimes in the rain and we waited a bit until the level of water in the ravines lowered).
- 07:00 Beginning of classes at the Cinco Pinos School
- 12:00 Walk back to El Espino again on the big hill.
- 14:00 Lunch
- 15:00 Helping in field tasks. In my case, herding and watering animals, carrying firewood, carrying water, etc.
- 18:00 Study with a lamp
- 20:00 Going to bed. However, if it was the time for milling sugar cane, we went to bed very late. That

was our main fun and there was no reason to go to bed early.

The next day back to school.

During vacations we had to do more work in the field and it was more demanding. The milling of sugar cane in the mill of La Caldera is for me one of the most beautiful memories of childhood. I remember each of my father's workers and I greatly admired the fact that though it was common in the area for workers operating sugar mills to become disabled because of an accident – many workers would lose a hand, that was not the case in my father's farm during more than 50 years. In the entire history of the Trapiche – the name we give to our sugar mill – no one to my knowledge ever lost his hands. My father would never allow anyone to operate the mill if he had been drinking or was very tired. He was always a very responsible man, a real man, one worthy of imitation!

I remember the "Gallina", that is the fire that is made with dry bagasse – the fibrous matter that remains after sugarcane stalks have been crushed to extract their juice – to illuminate the trapiche and the whole area. In the caldera there is still a Jenízaro tree that my father never wanted to sell even though he was offered lots of money for it. Refusing this shows one's pride and symbolizes one's love for the environment. Under the Jenízaro tree and next to the trapiche there is a bagazal (a water fall? A small cliff??). A fantastic place to jump, run, spin on your head, etc.

My mom worked a lot. When I was sugarcane milling time, I remember her constantly making tortillas for all the workers, cooking and frying beans, and making coffee. It's probably her continuous exposure to smoke that accounts for the fact that she now has cataracts in her eyes. But such was the way life there and in those times.

My mother was a seamstress and always try to make new clothes for us at important festivities. We were proud of the clothes she made, and she had quite a reputation in Cinco Pinos for being an excellent seamstress.

We had a great time during our childhood. One of my father's workers was called Rosendo Gunera. He was one of the most comical men in the area. We would laugh nonstop all night just listening to his stories and jokes. The milling of sugarcane is one of my most beautiful memories. Our park was the bagazal; there we played many children's games that have now been disappearing. There we learned to kiss young girls, to make love, to drink guarapo (a sweet juice made with sugarcane), to watch the full moon at midnight, to eat delicious fried beans after "El Toro" (a caramel that is produced with the last portion of sugarcane juice, after it has been boiled for some time). It is a delicious candy.

It was cold in the Caldera. We slept on wooden benches or improvised wooden beds. The house did not have walls, and it still does not have any. Producing alfeñique – a candy made of boiled sugarcane juice – was something I never managed to learn even though I tried to many times. My brothers, Julian and Ariel, were the experts. I depended on them to have my own alfeñiques.

In El Espino there were people whom we always admired and respected. There was Juancito (Milton's father) who was our doctor, Hermelinda and Ursulino, Uncle Julián, and Dominga Soriano. They never allowed us to pronounce one single bad word. They taught us to respect others and Juancito taught us at an early age to clandestinely listen to Radio Habana Cuba, Radio Rebelde on the first radios that arrived in the area: A red Philips from Juancito and a Sony Blanco from my dad.

The Cuban revolution, Fidel and Che Guevara, became for me a role model, a hope for poor people.

LIFE IN CINCO PINOS:

In the town of Cinco Pinos, I had many friends. Life there was a little different. Even in the town we did not have a latrine for our house. There was drinking water.

Our chores there were different, although carrying firewood continued being our responsibility.

In school, as far as I remember, we always got the best grades. That is why I won, in departmental best student competition, a scholarship to study in León. Studying was always an obsession for all of us. Even though we were very poor, I NEVER remember ever worrying about it. Feeling poor was not a problem either. Our goal was to study and learn. Maybe life allowed me to reach a higher academic level than my brothers and sisters, but that was only part of my luck. Any of my brothers and sisters, had they been given the same opportunities that I had, could undoubtedly have achieved the same level of education that I did. We were good students and we were proud of it, although we always kept quiet about it. People in Cinco Pinos know that we were all very good students and that we liked to study and work.

I wore my very first pair of shoes on September 14, for our national celebrations (Fiestas Patrias). I slept with them on and I did not sleep a wink all night because I was constantly looking at them. What a joy to have shoes for the first time !!! They were black canvas with white soles, brand Rolter.

Our parents taught us to read books and that considerably boosted our motivation to learn. I remember reading The Thousand and One Nights, Reader's Digest selections of many children's stories. I always wanted to be a scientist like those who appeared in those books.

As I go on relating my past, I realize that there are so many things to tell and analyze. Maybe one day it would be a good idea to write an expanded version and to share it with others. My brother Ariel studied in Chinandega and when he would come home I would read the English books that he had; that's how I started liking English. I would study and study until I could start understanding some of these books.

SCHOLARSHIP IN LEON:

In February 1972 I started my electronics studies in León. It was a college of Christian brothers who would eventually baptize me, at age 15, into Catholicism.

I remember that some of my friends in León would make fun of me because I was a "jinchito" (a derogatory term to refer to those originating from the countryside). I once fought with someone who wanted to discriminate against me and I did not do very well in the fight.

The brothers of the La Salle Polytechnic Institute taught me to study and work. I think that part of my education marked my life forever.

In my first year of study, I published an article in a magazine called El Heraldo Proletario. It was a frontal attack on the Somoza family and the criminal regime that governed Nicaragua. As a result of that article, people in the FSLN contacted me and asked whether I would like to join the FSLN. Of course, I said yes. I was 13 years old. Thereafter I carried out any task that they gave me. Being a member of the FSLN in those days was a source of personal pride for us, a way of being different, of being a true and brave militant, of not being afraid of the National Guard, of going into the underground, of being a hero. For me the National Guard represented a symbol of terror.

In my group I had friends who were important militants of the FSLN and I had absolutely no idea that they were. Two

of them, Benito Hernández and Juan Álvarez, died next to the commander Carlos Fonseca in Zinica in 1976.

In 1976 I won a scholarship to study electronics in an elite school in Colombia: The National Center for Electricity and Electronics of SENA Colombia. The teaching there was excellent, but very challenging. To enter SENA to study industrial electronics, one had to compete with some 3,000 other applicants; and they would only accept 40 of them. And of these 40, only 16 would end up graduating. Although my classmates had studied more physics and mathematics than I had, when I obtained my Baccalaureate I got the title of best student. I am the one that made the graduation speech, and in it I denounced the Somoza dictatorship.

Colombia is one of the most beautiful countries I have ever known, and I will never forget its people. Although I ended up losing my scholarship because of the war in Nicaragua, they continued helping me until I finished my studies. I owe a lot of my training to them.

I graduated in June 1979. Starting in 1977, I cooperated with the Sandinista Front in Colombia and participated in all Nicaragua solidarity events that were held there. I joined the Nicaragua Solidarity Committee and then the Simón Bolívar Internationalist Combatants Brigade. This Brigade sent about two thousand fighters to Nicaragua, many of whom fell heroically. Two of my Nicaraguan comrades from the Brigade fell during the war of liberation: Max Leoncio Senqui Casco in Jinotega and Marlon Zelaya in 1983 in Río San Juan. They came and left me as representative of the Nicaraguans in the brigade.

When I finished my studies, I decided to come and fight in Nicaragua. I was imprisoned in Colombia for two days for my participation in some of these activities. I scheduled my ticket to Costa Rica for July 23, together with a large

contingent of fighters. However, I suddenly heard, on a street in Colombia when listening to Radio Sandino, that the Sandinista Popular Revolution had been victorious. On July 23, I arrived in Costa Rica at an FSLN training house (second floor of a Monastery in San José). From there they moved us on July 25 to Managua and there we fought hard (after the triumph) with Nicaraguan and Korean guards who were in the cathedral of Managua. After ten days of night fighting we managed to neutralize them.



In the back row on the left: Elmer, during an APRODESE meeting

NATIONAL LITERACY CRUSADE:

The most beautiful thing in which I have ever participated. Describing it would require an entire book!!! For the Sandinista Revolution I was willing, and still am to this day, to make a total commitment, including sacrificing my life if necessary. That was the philosophy of my generation, something that was normal for us. Something

that the leaders of the United States will never understand. When inspired by an ideal that is just and profound, there are populations that are willing to make a radical commitment. Fear, laziness, and lack of resources simply do not exist. The only thing that exists is love for others, the dream of a new society and the infinite willingness to sacrifice. Participating in the revolution was a blessing for us. The revolution inculcated very high values in us. It taught us not to be cowards, to be honest, to improvise, not to create problems but to solve them, to see the future with optimism and to fight for it.

If there was no food, it did not matter. We were always lucky enough to find a hamlet or town that would help us.

In the defense of the revolution, I participated in several armed combats, many war mobilizations, and many high-risk tasks difficult to describe and explain. I fulfilled any task that the revolution assigned me and for this I won many medals, diplomas and above all the happiness of having faithfully served my country. Describing this part would also require an entire book! If I am proud of anything, it is the fact that despite Reagan's immense investment in an unjust war, he never managed to defeat us militarily. That pride will be with me until my last breath!

Things I will never forget about the revolution:

- The fall of Somoza.
- The National Literacy Crusade in Jalapa.
- The Sandinista's immense courage to defeat the Contra and the gringos.
- The agrarian reform.
- The drastic reduction of infant mortality and illiteracy.
- The quality and coverage of education.
- Health care.
- The companionship.

- The solidarity of the people.
- International solidarity.
- My Sandinista brothers who died in the war.

My current dreams:

- Train my children until they achieve their careers and obtain a doctorate in Europe.
- Continue with scientific research and my postdoctoral studies.
- Pursue the struggle so that the FSLN can be reelected so as to attain the dreams that have not yet come true.
- Develop projects to combat poverty throughout Nicaragua and in particular in the four municipalities of the North.
- Accumulate a fund that guarantees an insurance for my family in case something happens to me.
- Provide help to the poor, in whatever ways I can, so they can progress in their education and development.
- Help and try to imitate my parents until the last day of my life.
- Support my parents and my siblings to maintain a united and beautiful family as it has always been to this day.

I currently have two very beautiful children, Maria Lourdes and Elmer José and an adorable wife. I never punished my children and I promised them from an early age that I never would. Punishment and violence is something that must be eradicated. Both are excellent students, excellent children, very committed to the revolution and with many ideals and tasks to fulfill.

Thank you very much, friends from Canada!!!

Hurricane Mitch: Elmer's Open Letter to the President of Nicaragua

León, November 1, 1998
Dr. Arnoldo Alemán Lacayo
President, Republic of Nicaragua

Dear President Alemán:

I am the National Coordinator of the Sister City Projects between Austria and Nicaragua. As I am writing these lines I am crying. I am crying from indignation and, what is worse, out of IMPOTENCE. I am writing to you as an individual, encouraged to do so by the rights extended to me by Nicaragua's Constitution. I was born in the region of Somotillo-Cinco Pinos, one of the areas hardest hit by Hurricane Mitch. I repeat, I am writing to you as an individual, not because I am afraid of losing my job but because I do not wish to jeopardize any of the Austrian or German Committees which I represent.

During Hurricane Juan in 1988 and when Cerro Negro exploded in 1992, I was one of León's Community Movement evacuation and rescue coordinators. Our work was highly successful. I am experienced in this type of natural disaster.

I repeat: as I am writing, I am crying as if I were a child. I thought I'd used up all my tears during the war. Nonetheless, I will try to control my emotions in order to tell you what we are living through.

For Hurricane Juan in October of 1988, people had been organized into rescue brigades with plenty of lead time. The population had been taught the best ways of responding, and evacuation plans A, B, C and D had been established, depending upon the route the hurricane would

take. Radio stations advised people with coordinated messages and up to the minute information from the National Hurricane Center in Miami was constantly being transmitted so that people would be informed of the kinds of danger they faced.

With time to spare, before that hurricane hit, food, communication equipment and safety items were decentralized. Medical students and doctors volunteered and formed brigades with adequate goods in spite of the war. A Message to the Nation called for the political parties, the different organizations and churches, and the people in general to come together in a show of unity. In spite of the war and the high level of political polarization at the time, the effort was to unite the nation so it could better cope with the disaster. In 1988 a united and organized people faced nature as one person. Refugee centers even offered recreation to our children so they would not be overly traumatized. THE SERIOUSNESS OF OUR GOVERNMENT, ITS COHERENT AND GENEROUS MESSAGE, proved to be of incalculable value.

AS A RESULT: Material losses were enormous, but human loss was relatively small, despite the horrendous natural phenomenon that hit Nicaragua directly and in a time of war. For the government in office at the time, the first priority was that of SAVING HUMAN LIVES.

With Hurricane Mitch, in October 1998, you have not assumed with any degree of seriousness your role as President of the Republic. The country was not prepared in advance as to the nature of the hurricane nor the ways in which it might present itself. At a time like this the President in his high office, and the message he is able to offer, are of vital importance – for local institutions and organizations as well as for the international community. Especially important is enabling the people to combine its

resources and actions, in order that the effects of the disaster may be minimized.

At a crucial moment, hours before tragedy struck, you visited Chureca and, with a total lack of seriousness and even a certain joking attitude, made a declaration to National Television in which you downplayed the importance of the phenomenon and assured us that, according to INETER, the storm was retreating and heading for the Yucatán.

When natural disasters strike it is VITAL that the nation's highest leaders warn the population and offer it contingency plans with sufficient recourses prepared in the event of a sudden change in the storm's route. There must be an effective response on the part of the State and its institutions.

It is very difficult, Mr. President, for a people's organization or a Mayor to convince the population to take extraordinary measures if the President of the country is simultaneously claiming that there is no danger, that there is no national emergency. A country's president holds an office of supreme responsibility, and you proved yourself unfit for that responsibility.

I was simply stunned as I was listening to your declarations, for the satellite photos I was watching on my computer were clearly showing that the hurricane was changing latitude and longitude and heading for Nicaragua.

You divided the country arbitrarily, offending important parts of it by arguing that if you were not declaring an emergency, it was to avoid harming incoming international aid. The concept of NATIONAL EMERGENCY is precisely to make people realize imminent danger. Your priority, Mr. President, were the potatoes and beans being imported. Your priority was not the SAVING OF HUMAN LIVES.

A hurricane with the strength of Mitch is highly destructive, and a country with 70% of its population already living in extreme poverty and with a 30% illiteracy rate is particularly vulnerable.

At this moment there is no food in many places. Highways are blocked and our meager sanitary infrastructure destroyed. There are no medicines, the health system is bankrupt, and what is worse: there is no coherent, stimulating or hopeful message that might help people face the effects of this hurricane. Most probably there are still people buried in mud who might yet be saved. If we had a specialized system such as the 911 of other countries, if such a system had been set up in time, much of that human loss might have been avoided.

How many people died? How many people have been hurt? How great is our material loss? This type of disaster always produces dead, wounded, and the loss of property. I do not want to blame you for a "normal" number of losses. But how many dead, how many wounded, and how much property damage could have been AVOIDED, were it not for your government's IRRESPONSIBILITY AND INABILITY to act? I don't believe we will ever know.

Dr. Alemán, I don't want to keep on writing because I don't want to keep on crying. I think our priority right now is to help the victims as much as we can.

I ask you forgiveness if I have offended you. I also ask your fellow liberals for what I have expressed in this letter. I know that many of them also suffered the effects of this hurricane and that they dedicated themselves immediately to the task of saving people. I myself have witnessed the fact that the vast majority of Liberal and Sandinista mayors have acted expediently.

But allow me to say to you, with all the respect that your office inspires, FROM A TECHNICAL POINT OF VIEW

**YOUR ATTITUDE IN CONFRONTING THIS
DISASTER ENDANGERED THE PUBLIC HEALTH OF
ALL NICARAGUANS.**

If this was an error on your part, ask your people to forgive you and decree not a state of emergency at this late date, but three days of national mourning for the victims of Posoltega and of the nation as a whole. If you do not ask forgiveness, either for political reasons or out of arrogance, my humble opinion is not that you should step down – as thousands of people inside and outside of Nicaragua are already demanding – but that you and some of your Ministers of State should be imprisoned.

Cordial greetings,

Elmer Zelaya Blandon, Lic. Med. Sci.
Doctor of Epidemiology Candidate
University of Umea, Sweden

Testimony of Domitila, 45 years old

Email received on November 9, 2005

My name is Domitila Zelaya Blandón and I was born in El Espino on August 28, 1961 (45 years old).

I am currently living in my home in the city of León, but I work in APRODESE in El Espino as head of the Technical Assistance Area. I am married, and I have a beautiful 12 year-old daughter. She is in her first year of high school in the city of León and is also studying English.

As I said before, I was born in El Espino. Every day I would travel with my brothers and sisters about 7 km back and forth to go to school in Cinco Pinos, sometimes on foot and sometimes on horseback. My parents, peasants who got up very early to prepare food, never allowed us to miss classes.

When my parents realized how taxing it was for us to attend school in El Espino, they decided to build a little house in that town. My father lived with us in Cinco Pinos and would travel back and forth to the farm on horseback.

I finished primary school and moved to the city of Managua to pursue my high school studies. My brothers also did this. My parents worked hard to allow us to go to school. My mother made a living as a seamstress and my father was a hardworking peasant. They themselves did not go to school, but they were very wise in prioritizing our education and leaving us that as a legacy.

I am an agronomist and primary school teacher. I studied engineering at the National Agrarian University of Managua and trained to become a teacher in the city of León. I first trained to become a teacher, because my parents did not have enough money to finance my university studies.

When the Sandinista popular revolution took place, I gave myself completely to all the work entrusted to me. I participated in the National Literacy Crusade and joined the Lucrecia Lindo women's battalion of Chinandega.

In 1983, by order of the party, I was sent to teach in Río San Juan. As a reward for my participation in underground tasks during the revolution, in the National Literacy Crusade and in Coffee and Cotton Harvesting brigades, I was chosen to belong to the Benicio Herrera Jerez Brigade. In Río San Juan, I was first a primary school teacher, then the director of the El Castillo Institute. I also participated in the act declaring Río San Juan an illiteracy-free territory. I spent seven years working in this area and ended up becoming the Ministry of Education regional representative in San Carlos, Río San Juan.

I was able to pursue my university studies because of a scholarship granted to me by the revolution. However, this scholarship only lasted three years, because it was discontinued by government of Doña Violeta Chamorro when the FSLN lost the elections. I managed to complete my university degree thanks to the help my family provided me.

I also worked at the University of León for a period of two years in a study on sexual and reproductive health and participated in the development of the book titled [Confites en el Infierno \(Violencia Intrafamiliar\)](#). Then I worked in León in a non-governmental organization known as the Rural Women Committee. I was responsible for the economic empowerment sector and worked with a group of 400 women originating from the region surrounding León and Chinandega. That was a fantastic experience for me, a kind of school in which I learned a great deal about gender work. I am currently working in APRODESE and trying to make good use of everything I've learned in my life.



Domitila, second from the left, with women in the Centro de Capacitación – Gender Work

My first memory of the revolution was having participated in all the tasks the party gave me. The literacy crusade, the stay in Rio San Juan, the battalion of women, and all the importance that the revolution had for the poor.

During the revolution against the Somoza regime, I went underground and at night would work delivering messages to houses. Then, when the FSLN triumphed, I traveled to Honduras to carry out state security tasks and on several occasions, I infiltrated some of the Contra meetings, then communicated what I was learning to my superiors in Nicaragua. It was difficult and dangerous, but also very rewarding work, but I did it with a lot of love for the defense of the revolution.

History of Zelaya Blandón Family



Testimony of Lester, 43 years old

Name: Lester Adalberto Zelaya Blandón.

Nationality: 100 % Nicaraguan.

Date of birth: December 25, 1963.

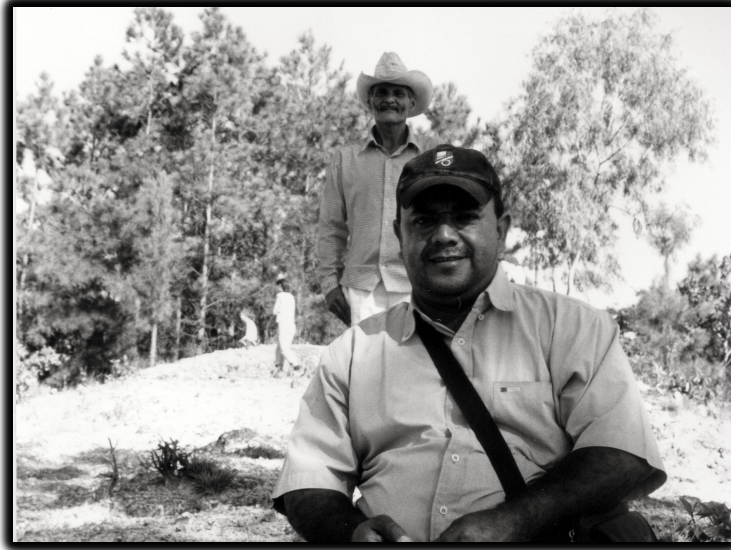
On dawn of a December 25, when everyone was tired because of Christmas Eve celebrations, a tiny and fragile child was born in a poor hamlet called El Espino to a humble peasant family. The child – a boy – was named Lester Adalberto Zelaya Blandón.

The name Adalberto was given in memory of my brother Edelberto's twin brother, Adalberto, who died a few days after they were born.

Lester, a child born at the low weight of only 5 pounds. With many deficiencies that almost lead to his death. I was so sick that, according to what my parents and brothers and sisters tell me, they stayed by my side day and night and had even bought a coffin and 'mortaja' – the white cloth they place on a dead person – for me.

At the age of five, I entered the primary school, Julián Irías, located in Cinco Pinos. I traveled with my sister, Domitila, sometimes on foot and sometimes on horseback (A white horse called CABALLIN). My father bought it for us to go to school because it was 7 kilometers from Espino where we lived.

Despite the challenges facing a child of poor parents, I was a happy, mischievous, and playful child. For me, my older brothers were the best and I always wanted to be like them. That is why we are very united: one's success is that of all of us, and one's failure is that of all of us.



Lester, in front of Don Erasmo

In January 1978 I moved to Estelí, a city in the north-west part of Nicaragua, with my mother and my three sisters so we could continue high school. I entered the Normal School of Estelí. In that same year, I joined the High School Student Federation (FES), a federation with revolutionary principles, and we started organizing student demonstrations in the streets of the city and we were repressed by the National Guard of Somoza, one of the bloodiest dictators of Latin America.

One day during a demonstration, I was hit by a tear gas bomb and I then captured by a member of the National Guard, who started hitting me with the butt of his rifle. So intense was the tear gas, that I could not breathe and thought I would die. I remember another member of the National Guard saying to the one who was hitting me with the butt of his rifle, "Kill him, kill him". However, he answered, "No, he is a minor". The National Guards left and then I was picked up by my colleagues, who took me

to the hospital. That day I did not return to my house and my mother worried a lot.

On September 9, the insurrection began in Estelí, Masaya, Managua, León, and Chinandega. There was intense fighting; the National Guards would take men from their homes and shoot them, Push and Pull planes were bombing the city, and there were thousands of dead.

In Estelí at that time there was my mom, Domitila, Thelma, Nellys and a cousin named Melania, Ariel and I, and we were all confined inside the house. There was no electricity or drinking water.

My dad was in El Espino, and the National Guards had captured Edelberto and Julian in Jalapa. Though we thought Elmer was studying in Colombia, he was fighting on the southern frontier with Costa Rica.

I remember that there was a fight in front of our house in Estelí and a guerrilla fighter named Teodoro López, who was wounded in the foot, entered our house from the back of the patio. Ariel and I helped him and once he was inside the house we started tending to his wound.

Members of the National Guard, who had followed the trail of blood, suddenly arrived. They entered the house and one of them exclaimed, upon seeing him, "Here you are, you son of a bitch!" And they started arguing, but the guerrilla simply asked them to kill him, but to spare us.

And so that's what happened: they opened the door, had him walk into the street, and, in the presence of all of us, they killed him. Another member of the National Guard grabbed Ariel, and I held him back by the neck, so they would not kill him. However, a member of the Honduran DIN guard, who was also present, started telling the Nicaraguan guards that they were criminals, and I think that's why they did not kill us.

I returned to Cinco Pinos and, now that I had been initiated to revolutionary ideas, I started meeting with Bismark Mendoza, Holman Baquedano and other youth of the town, and explained to them that what was going on was a revolutionary struggle.



Lester, front left, with Don Paco, front right

The following year, on July 19, 1979, the Nicaraguan Revolution triumphed.

In September 1979, my brother Elmer, whom I appreciate very much for all that he has done for me – I could say that he is like my second father –, takes me to León and registers me in the La Salle Polytechnic Institute, the school where he had studied.

In February 1980, I participated as a brigadista in the National Literacy Crusade, which is one of the great historical achievements of the revolution. I worked in the mountainous region of Jalapa, Nueva Segovia.

In 1982, while I was studying at the La Salle Polytechnic Institute for three months, I joined a reserve army battalion to go to fight against the Contras in the mountains.

In December 1984, I graduated as an industrial technician in electromechanics and in January 1985 I was drafted into the Army to fulfill my Patriotic Military Service (SMP). This military service only lasted six months, however, since I had fought in previous years in reserve battalions, and with this I had completed the two years established in the SMP law.

In October of that same year, as I had already graduated as an industrial technician, the Sandinista Youth gave me the responsibility of heading machinery maintenance at the Los Muchachos Press. In this press, donated by Germany (FRG), I was producing a magazine for Nicaraguan youth.

In November, the Sandinista Youth gave me a scholarship to train me in Dusseldorf, Germany to the European system of graphic printing machinery. While in Germany I participated, as a representative of Nicaragua, in the world forum that took place in Hamburg in order to denounce the atrocities being committed by U.S. imperialism in various countries of the world.

I returned to Nicaragua in May 1986 and continued working at the Los Muchachos Press.

On September 11, 1987, at about 7 am (I will never forget this date), I happened to come across – it was on a small bridge above a creek that was between the printing house where I worked and the National Headquarters of the Sandinista Youth – one of the top commanders of the Nicaraguan revolution, [Bayardo Arce Castaño](#). We started chatting, and in the course of our conversation he asked me if I was studying. When I replied that I wasn't, he said, "Would you like to study abroad?" I answered yes, and he

immediately asked one of his escorts for paper and a pen and wrote down the following note of four lines:

Mr. Ricardo Baltodano, I request that a scholarship be granted to the youth Lester Zelaya to study in whatever country he chooses.

att. Bayardo Arce.

When I handed the note to Ricardo, he did not think that the note had been given to me by the commander, and he told me, “Lester, there’s only one place left, it’s for Hungary, and they are leaving the day after tomorrow at 8 am”. I immediately replied, “It doesn’t matter, I’ll go with them”.

And that’s exactly what happened: the following day after I lent a van to travel to Cinco Pinos to say goodbye to my parents and siblings. I remember that Elmer gave me a new pair of pants, since at that time it was very difficult to get new clothes because of the blockade.

And on September 13 at 8 am, I traveled to Hungary with a backpack containing 4 shirts, 3 pairs of pants, 5 underwear, a toothbrush and a deodorant. To conceal the fact that I was a traveler, a girl named Chilo lent me one of the two suitcases she was using.

Here begins a new stage of my life.

Testimony of Thelma, 38 years old

I am happy to write my autobiography and also have an interest in the history of my family. We are very grateful and proud. In what follows, my story.

My name is Maria Thelma Zelaya Blandón. I was born in Cinco Pinos, department of Chinandega, on June 9, 1968. I am 38 years old. I currently live in the city of León, where I have been since 1980 when I moved there to attend high school.

I attended primary school in Cinco Pinos. To get to school we had to walk daily approximately 7 km from La Caldera to Cinco Pinos and back, and this was very taxing. I was a girl and I found it was just too much for me to walk that long distance every day. They moved me one year to the grade school of El Espino, but in those days, this school only offered the first three grades. So, my parents decided to move to Cinco Pinos in order to make it easier for us to attend school.

My mother left with us and my father was left alone in La Caldera and that broke my soul. So much so, as a matter of fact, that I still cannot erase that image from my mind. I would cry because my parents had never separated. He would travel to Cinco Pinos four times a week but would arrive late at night and would leave the next day at dawn to return to La Caldera to work. We stayed there until 1977.

In 1978 they decided that we would move to Estelí, to live in a house given to us by my mother's dad. My brothers started high school there, and I still had one year to go before I could go on in the Ruben Darío public school, a school for children with very limited resources. However, I was not able to finish that year, because the war of insurrection began.

In that situation, we experienced, my siblings and I, a very traumatic experience, since the genocidal National Guard viciously assassinated a guerrilla who was wounded. They were going to massacre the whole family, had it not been that one of the guards found and read a letter from my father in which he was urging his boys not to get involved in anything. That was like a miracle, because they were going to blast everyone.

Another fight broke out not far from our neighborhood and they ran off. At this very moment, I am crying because I am reliving this trauma. Because of all this, we had to leave Estelí in the middle of gun shots and the roads being bombed. At the places where we stayed, we would sleep on the floor and we did not have food, we were very hungry.

My mother decided to return to the city when the war was still going on, because either the bullets killed us, or we died of hunger, well here the war was lost. But my brother Edelberto and Julian were in jail in Jalapa.

We moved again to Cinco Pinos where we suffered the contempt of people because they said that we were Sandinistas. We no longer had friends because their parents forbade them to come to us, they treated us like lepers, so much so that I would have preferred to stay in Estelí.

I did not manage to pass sixth grade, because, as they were trying to kill my brothers, we had to go to Honduras. I was again heartbroken, because we separated from my parents and suffered a lot in Honduras. We returned before the triumph because it was preferable to die, but close to our parents. What happiness when our beloved Revolution triumphed!

Then I finished my elementary school and the literacy crusade started. All my siblings – Nellys and I did not because we were still too young – in this crusade.

Later I was transferred to León to register in the Preparatory School where I learned the whole history of the Sandinista popular revolution and where I completed my high school in an accelerated three-year course. I was one of the best students, and I managed to finish in 1985. Then, in 1986, I joined UNAN León to study medicine.

In that same year I made the mistake of getting married, since I was still a teenager. In my second year at university, I had a beautiful girl who is currently 17 years old; she is my only child and studies marketing and advertising at the University of Commercial Sciences thanks to the support of Canadians. She is a good student and has also inculcated the principles and values of our family and of the Revolution. It is thanks to the revolution that we can attend university, because before that only the elite could.

All was going well until the Sandinistas lost the elections in 1990. Then our Calvary began. In 1992, we started being led by the bourgeoisie, and the doors for ordinary people to attend university were closed. We began to suffer economically, and health was no longer a government priority.

I managed to do my social service in 1994 and in that year, I decided to compete with 600 colleagues to enter the specialty where there were only 60 places. Despite such strong competition, I managed to obtain my first choice, Integral Medicine. I was thinking about the situation of people in my region of Cinco Pinos, where health care is inaccessible and more specialized medical attention is in such great demand.

I studied integral medicine – with a lot of sacrifice and with the help of my family that was always there to help me – at the Nicaraguan German Hospital in Managua. I passed with good grades and managed to finish in 1998,

just when the strike of Médicos Pro-Salarios (Doctors for Salaries) began. I was fired by the Ministry of health (MINSA) for participating in this strike.

I was finally reintegrated into the Sistema Local de Atención Integral en Salud (SILAIS) of León in the Mantica Health Center where I have been working for seven years and where I am also teaching. I am in charge of seven programs, including the intrafamily violence program. Intrafamily violence is very frequent in León in all social sectors.

At the beginning of this year I suffered an elbow injury for writing so much and for not having good working conditions. We work extremely hard and share in the suffering experienced by our patients. The latter have free medical consultations but must foot the bill of the pharmaceutical products that we prescribe, something a great many of our patients simply cannot afford. MINSA presently only prioritizes maternal and child programs, and patients with chronic diseases. A list of only 75 pharmaceutical products are paid by the government; everything is rationed.



Thelma, on the left, meeting one of her patients

Before the revolution, health and education were a priority and, despite the ongoing Contra war, there was everything . Nicaraguans were able to meet their basic needs and one did not see as much hunger as one does now.

For me, the revolution was one of the greatest experiences of my life, and I remember every moment of it with a lot of nostalgia. The memory of this revolution will always be with me.

My first memory of the revolution was the triumph on July 19, 1979 when we cried with joy because the Somoza dictatorship had come to an end.

I did not have the opportunity to work as a doctor in the revolution, but I experienced it as a student and if I compare before and now, a 360 degree turn was made. It was much better with the revolution, there were pharmaceutical products and the health personnel had all the basic supplies to prevent contamination. Now in our hospitals there is nothing, patients have to buy numerous things, even a syringe, one constantly hears cries, and shortages are such that the sheets for the hospital beds are used ones coming from motels. In some places, doctors use the back of old calendars or of printed paper donated by photocopy companies to write prescriptions.

Each day the situation becomes more critical because the salary we earn is very low and does not even allow us to meet our basic needs. My salary, being a specialist with seven years of experience, is barely 7000 córdobas (less than \$200 US per month), and there are salaries as low as 1200, which is what a domestic employee earns in a house. That is why so many people are emigrating to other countries.

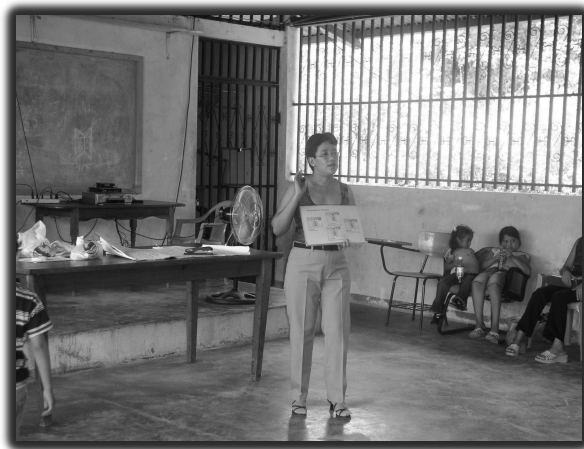
At this moment, we health workers have been on a national strike since November 14. First it was the doctors who went on strike, and then all other health workers. We are

fighting for a living wage and demand pharmaceutical products for our patients; we do not know how long it will last. Such a strike was unheard of during the revolution.

There are many things that I will not be able to finish relating today, as my elbow is already hurting. I want to express the pride that I have of having the parents that I have. Parents who, despite their poverty, were extremely wealthy in spirit and character. I am also proud of having brothers who continue struggling and honoring the principles and values that our parents and our beloved revolution taught us. As a matter of fact in El Espino we are experiencing a mini-revolution, an attempt to break the cycle of poverty; and we still have the international solidarity of people like you.

Infinite thanks and let us go forward; our people need us a lot.

LONG LIVE MY DEAR SANDINISTA POPULAR REVOLUTION!



Thelma, leading a health workshop in the Centro de Capacitación

Testimony of Nellys, 33 years old

My name is Nellys Zelaya Blandón, I was born in Cinco Pinos on January 22, 1972, I am 33 years old. Because of an accident that I had as a child and which left half of my face disfigured, my parents decided to put me in school in León in order to facilitate the many visits to the doctor I had to make. I spent a year studying in León at the Asunción de María school, then returned to continue my primary school at the public school in Cinco Pinos. After completing my grade school, I returned to León to continue my high school studies. In León, I managed to get a scholarship to study my high school in the Preparatory School.

However, I had to interrupt my high school studies for one year, the time it took for me to undergo a surgery in Havana, Cuba. I then returned to Nicaragua and resumed my high school studies.

When I graduated, I decided to go to Managua to study for a degree in English. I was granted a scholarship for this, but I ended up attending only fifteen days of classes. This abrupt interruption was caused by the electoral victory of Violeta Barrios de Chamorro. I had to abandon my studies and immediately move to Cuba to undergo several complex surgeries on my face, given the fact that the agreements between Nicaragua and Cuba that rendered these costly surgeries free, would immediately come to an end as soon as Violeta Chamorro was inaugurated. Because of this, I had to stay in Cuba for two years.

I was alone in Cuba during that time and unable to return. After two years, I had to return to Nicaragua because I had to rest from the surgical treatments. Then I joined the University of León (UNAN). I had to combine my university studies with my surgical treatments. For me it

was very hard, because upon arriving from a surgery, I had to resume my university studies. I managed to graduate thanks to the support that my teachers, family and friends gave me.

I am currently living in El Espino and am teaching computer classes to young people in the area.

I am the youngest of eight children. Since my siblings are fairly older than me and moved to study in León and Managua when they were fairly young, I ended up living my childhood alone with my two parents. My siblings, being fairly older than me, all participated in the Nicaraguan revolution and I could not share my childhood with them.

I do not have children.

I graduated from UNAN-León in April 2000. I got a degree in computing; it took me five and a half years to obtain this degree. During my university studies, I worked in the area of computing in the UNAN Reproductive Health and Child Maternity Project. I worked on two occasions entering the survey data obtained from the population through interviewers on the computer. After that I got temporary computer work in the Rural Women's Committee of León. I am currently working in El Espino giving computer courses to people in the area.

My first memory of the revolution was having participated in the activities carried out by the Sandinista Children's Association Luis Alfonso Velásquez Flores. I participated in different children's activities of that association. These usually consisted in exchange activities with other children originating from other parts of the country. As a teenager I unfortunately did not participate in other youth activities due to the fact that my health problem obliged me to travel every so often to Cuba to undergo surgical treatments.

The triumph of the revolution was a beautiful experience for all of us because I remember that as a child I lived in war. I remember that when we moved to Estelí the whole family there lived very tense moments. I remember very well those episodes of war that we lived. I remember that because of the bombing we had to flee from Estelí, and my mother, so I would not see all the corpses on the streets, would cover my eyes.

Then we returned to Cinco Pinos again and we had to go to Honduras because of the war. I remember very well when we were in Honduras: I was playing when a lot of planes started flying above us; they were the planes of the Somozas who were fleeing Nicaragua after the triumph of the revolution.

We returned immediately to Nicaragua, and it was an unforgettable and wonderful experience. Revolution for us meant hope, a lot of development for all, the possibility of continuing one's education, including opting for a university career, and agreements with Cuba on health and education. Thanks to the latter agreements I was able to go to Cuba to receive free medical treatments, and to this day I am still receiving these in Havana, Cuba.

Years will go by, but I will never forget what the revolution did for me and for all those who, like me, managed to receive medical treatments that it would have been impossible to receive in other countries, given the prohibitively high costs of these treatments.

Our December 28th interview with Nellys

Notes by Ovide Bastien

Our interview with Nellys started slowly. At one point, Natasha asked Nellys if she had felt pressure from her family to advance academically. Obviously, the question corresponded to something very profound and very difficult for her. There followed a silence that seemed an eternity. Efforts to speak, efforts that seemed extremely difficult and painful.

Nellys began opening up to us and went relating for at least an hour and with abundant tears, her struggle following her accident as a child, her numerous trips (12) to Cuba for surgical interventions on her face, her pain, the deep loneliness she experienced in Cuba being away from her family, the immense happiness she one day felt when, after looking at herself in the mirror, she realized that her struggle had been successful.

She told us about her immense struggle to obtain, in spite of all the obstacles she was facing, an academic education. Another struggle whose outcome was successful, thanks to her determination, and to the support of her family and her friends, the people of Cuba.

Her testimony, so simple and yet so powerful and profound, contained an amazing courage and beauty very difficult to convey in words. Thank you, Nellys, for your beautiful testimony. Each student present at the interview told me that for them you represented a model of courage and inspiration.

What did we discover?

Despite the fact that our small research project is modest and has many limitations, what we learned is extremely interesting. The Zelaya Blandón family is indeed very special.

Even though both the father, José, and the mother, Paula, are from a modest campesino origin and live in one of the poorest countries of Latin America, every single one of their eight children managed to obtain a university degree, sometimes in foreign countries.

Particularly remarkable is the fact that all three women in the family, in a country known for its machismo, achieved a high level of education, Domitila working as an agronomist, Thelma as a doctor, and Nellys as a computer expert.

How was such an achievement possible?

A factor that seems decisive: the unity and extraordinary stamina of the family.

The parents always prioritized the education of their children and worked very honestly and very hard. Paula, the center of family life, assumed all the tasks of a mother and also collaborated in the tasks of the field, working very long hours when it was time to feed the workers who were harvesting sugar cane and operating the sugar mill known as the trapiche. She also helped out the family financially through her work as seamstress. José, a particularly disciplined farmer, who never smoked or drank; a peasant who knew how to develop an intelligent plan for his family (build a house in Cinco Pinos to promote the education of his children who would no longer have to walk 14 km per day to go to school), who worked very hard, and who, besides farming, developed a rudimentary commercial

activity, traveling to Somotillo and sometimes Chinandega to purchase certain commodities and reselling them in the Cinco Pinos region.

The sons and daughters are also particularly closely knit. They have always helped each other and continue to do so today. There are many examples of that help in the testimonies of each of the eight members of the family.

For example, Lester, speaking of his brother Elmer, says, : “ I appreciate him very much for all that he has done for me – I could say that he is like my second father”.

Another factor that, obviously, was decisive: the Sandinista revolution and international solidarity. Many benefited from the generosity of the Sandinista revolutionary government and international solidarity to advance their studies, often in other countries.

- Elmer: “Colombia is one of the most beautiful countries I have ever known, and I will never forget its people. Although I ended up losing my scholarship because of the war in Nicaragua, they continued helping me until I finished my studies. I owe a lot of my training to them”.
- Julian: “After participating in the literacy crusade, I traveled to the Republic of Germany to study for a year”.
- Lester: “In November, the Sandinista Youth gave me a scholarship to train me in Dusseldorf Germany to the European system of graphic printing machinery.” Thanks to a fortuitous meeting with one of the top leaders of the Sandinista revolution, commander Bayardo Arce Castaño, Lester was able to obtain a scholarship to study also in Hungary.

The family is also very special because of the fact that it continues to work with the same spirit as the Sandinista

revolution. All the children, except Nellys who was still a child at the time, were deeply involved in the revolutionary process. And they continue working today with the same spirit.

Elmer is the director of Coordination of the Twinning and Initiatives of Austrian Cooperation (CHICA), an Austrian organization that ensures the coordination of the Twinning between cities, universities, districts, schools and colleges, solidarity groups and other projects between Nicaragua and Austria. CHICA supports different types of projects such as education, health, infrastructure, gender and environment.

Edelberto is the director of the Association for the Socioeconomic Development of El Espino and Neighboring Hamlets (APRODESE), a Nicaraguan NGO founded in 1998. APRODESE has many impressive achievements: the construction of houses after Hurricane Mitch in 1998; the construction and management of a system that allows around 300 families to have access to piped potable water; sewing, welding, carpentry, electricity courses, and computer courses; construction of a high-speed Internet center, a center that also allows people to make telephone calls at a reasonable price, scholarships for university studies.

Here it is convenient to quote Thelma:

“I want to express the pride that I have of having the parents that I have. Parents who, despite their poverty, were extremely wealthy in spirit and character. I am also proud of having brothers who continue struggling and honoring the principles and values that our parents and our beloved revolution taught us. As a matter of fact, in El Espino we are experiencing a mini-revolution, an attempt to break the cycle of poverty; and we still have the international solidarity of people like you.”

History of Zelaya Blandón Family



Potable water – Project of APRODESE



Carpentry course - Centro de Capacitación of APRODESE

What did we discover?



APRODESE Internet Center



Computer courses in the APRODESE Internet Center

Interview Questions

Family Life

1. Who are the first ancestors of your family that you can remember? In what year were they born? Did they live in El Espino? If not, where? How did they end up moving to the El Espino region?
2. What are some of your family values? Have these changed over time? If so, how have they changed? Do your family members have the same values?
3. You belong to a family that has played a key role in your community. Why do you think that your family decided to become so involved in the community?
4. What would be your family's proudest achievement thus far? What is the relationship between your family and other community members in the region of El Espino?
5. Do you feel that your family lives in a class-structured society?
6. What did your parents think about you leaving to study and work? Was it very hard for them to let you go or did they understand your decision? (Perhaps it was their decision as well.)
7. Did your family life/childhood have anything to do with your decision to go to university?
8. What kind of childhood did you have? Was it hard? Did you have to do many chores or work to contribute to your family? Describe a typical day in your family when you were a teenager.
9. Where have you lived? Did you move various times, to different places?
10. Are you presently married? Separated? Do you have any children? How many? How old are they?

What are they now doing? What are their plans for the future?

Revolution

11. What do you remember about the revolution most vividly? What impact did it have on your life?
12. What was your role in taking part in the revolution? Were you involved in the armed struggle against the Somoza regime? If so, describe what you did.
13. Is there something you wish you had done, or done differently, in taking part in the revolution?
14. What was the influence of your family as a whole on the revolution?
15. Were there changes in your relationship with your family or relations within your family after the revolution?
16. What was the family's role in the revolution? What was their position? Were they benefited?
17. What was your life like during the revolution? Did you have to give up many things? How was your life impacted?
18. Describe the key benefits, in the region of El Espino, of the Sandinista revolution of the 1980s in terms of farming, health, education and democracy in general?
19. Describe the key errors committed by the Sandinista government at the national level. Describe the key errors committed by the Sandinista leaders in the region of El Espino.
20. Were you involved in the Contra War? If so, describe and discuss your involvement. Also point out the damage on the region of the Contra War.

Career

21. What profession do you have presently? What made you choose this profession?
22. What did you study? Why did you choose this field of study? Where did you pursue your studies, abroad or Nicaragua? Why? During your studies, did you ever decide to alter your field of study? If so, why? Where did you obtain the money to finance your studies? Only from your family? From grants or scholarships? If so, what organizations or countries were providing the grants or scholarships? How long did you study? What degrees did you obtain and in which educational institutions did you obtain them?
23. Who in your family has gone abroad to work or find work? Why did they go? Where did they go? What did they do? How long did they stay? Did they prefer living outside of Nicaragua? Why or why not?
24. While you were working or studying abroad, were you ever so discouraged that you thought of giving up and returning home to Nicaragua? If so what happened?
25. When you were a child or a teenager, what did you want to do in life? Does it correspond to what you ended up doing?
26. What different jobs have you held in your life? Describe each one of them. Have you ever owned a firm operating on the basis of profit? Do you presently own such a firm?
27. Have you been involved in the foundation of any non-governmental organizations? If so, describe these organizations and their achievements. Also point out the role that you have played, or are still playing, in each one of these.

Questions addressed to the women in the family

28. Have you found it difficult gaining recognition for your work because of being a woman in a male dominated culture?
29. What are the main factors that contributed to your being able to pursue careers as opposed to the more traditional life as wives and mothers?
30. Do you find that as a woman pursuing a career, you have to do much more work than men? More precisely, do you find that you have to carry both the burden of the work related to your career and also the bulk of the work at home (cooking, house cleaning, helping children with their homework, etc.).

Appendix 1 - The Patriarch of Cinco Pinos

[La Prensa,](#)

<https://www.laprensa.com.ni/2014/05/18/seccion-domingo/194790-el-patriarca-de-cinco-pinos>
May 18, 2014

By Amalia del Cid

At age 88, Mr. José Zelaya, a farmer in the isolated hamlet of El Espino, reads newspapers on the Internet every day.

Before a computer, the patriarch José “Chepito” Zelaya, a peasant by profession, inheritance and conviction, used to be at a total loss. One could say that if he ever managed to learn to use computers, it is because of his stubbornness and his attitude of never giving up. After all, not everyone starts using the Internet once they are more than 80 years old, not everyone starts attending school once they are more than 70 years old, and not everyone sends his eight children to university while being a simple peasant operating a sugar mill.

Now, trembling and uncertain, his hand rests on the ‘mouse’ and the news start scrolling down on his computer screen. “Chepito”, as he is called in the region, reads without glasses, a tanned straw hat pulled on his head. He stops, for example, when he sees the word “earthquake” and exclaims, with the faltering voice of an old man: “You see, it happened in Panama!” This is how he keeps informed daily about what is happening in Nicaragua and the rest of the world, and sometimes he comes across some news – some recent and some old – that he finds very upsetting.

History of Zelaya Blandón Family

Newspapers don't arrive in El Espino, he explains, and that's why he learned to use the Internet.

He was born in that border town of San Juan de Cinco Pinos, Chinandega, 88 years ago, when in the area "everything was mountains and there were only three houses". He was raised by an uncle. We know that his father worked the land and produced sugarcane, but no one knows what his mother was like, because not even he remembers her. His father's name was Jacinto Mejía, and his mother's Domitila Zelaya Escalante. When his father went off with another woman, his mother gave up living.

"I was four years old when she died. All I can remember is a kind of bundle lying down. When my dad left, she became very sad and depressed, and sometimes it turned into fits of madness. She suffered immensely and so did I," recalls "Chepito", sitting in the room in which he manages his old business: a corner store with two showcases ranging from aspirin to sweet fish and balls of wool.

On the wall of the store, one can see, among the many photos, that of Paula Cruz Blandón, the woman who helped him become the person that he is. She was, so to speak, his better half. And she did as much as he did to guide his children, so they could advance in their studies and end up even bringing the Internet, solar energy and drinking water to the isolated hamlet of El Espino.

"Before 1998 there was nothing like that around here," comments Nellys Zelaya, the youngest daughter.

Somehow, this story is about both. Because "Chepito" would not be the person that he is without Paula and Paula would have been the person that she was without "Chepito".

SOMETHING CALLED INTERNET

“How do I get into this darn thing? Help me, I do not understand how to make this thing work!” would exclaim an irritated “Chepito” to his children. He used to call them by radio, when they were on the farm near the sugar mill where he spent his life working, to ask them how to browse on the Internet. And it is from there that he would receive instructions. His wife, Paula, did the same thing. With the difference that she would manage to adapt more quickly to new technology.

They always liked studying, their children say. “Chepito” started attending school when he was a child, but soon had to abandon school to work in the field. Farm work can’t wait. You had to plant, sow vegetables, drive oxen and harvest the beans. However, he resumed his schooling thanks to the literacy crusade of the 1980s.

Doña Paula, on the other hand, was forbidden by her father to study, because school “was not for women”. And she had to ask for help from her brothers, who did attend classes, in order to learn to read. “There is nothing worse than being illiterate,” she would repeat to her own children many years later.

There were times of shortage in which all we would eat in our house were tortillas with salt and all we would drink was coffee stirred with corn. Despite this, nobody stopped studying. “Chepito” went to live with his family in the town of Cinco Pinos, despite the fact that he did not like to live there very much, even to this day. He did this so his children would not have to walk seven km back and forth to school like he did as a child.

Over time, the offspring won scholarships and left the region, heading for a better destination. Today the family has a mathematician, two graduates in Social Sciences, a

lawyer, two doctors, an agronomist engineer, and a systems engineer.

Two of them, Elmer and Edelberto, have made constant efforts for years to channel European investment and aid to the people in their native region. And it is thus that their region has experienced unprecedented progress and development. None of them forgot where they came from. Not even Elmer, a philosopher and medical epidemiologist who graduated in Sweden.

“Chepito” traveled to Sweden to attend that graduation. “We passed by the place where The Hague is. What’s the name of that country? Ah, yes, Holland! Then we went to Amsterdam and from there we flew to Sweden,” he comments enthusiastically. For him, that was one of the most memorable experiences of his life. However, he adds: “It’s beautiful, very beautiful. But I would never change it for my country. Over there, it’s just water and here we have land.”

AUTODIDACT

A few years ago, when he had the opportunity to enter an adult education program, “Chepito”, neither short nor lazy, signed up. He started writing in scribblers at home, so as not to lose his habit, and in 2000 he finally finished his primary school. He was the oldest and the best student in the class.

“I’ve always liked to read,” he explains. He likes almanacs and saves like a treasure every newspaper that falls into his hands. He also recites poetry.

“I do not want to say what I have seen through the crystal of experience; the world is a market where honors, and people’s will and conscience are bought”, he whispers with a tired voice. “It’s called Bitter Truths (Verdades Amargas). Do you know that poem?”

For the last three years he has felt a little alone in this world. Doña Paula passed away on February 3, 2011 and he still looks at her in the photo on the wall.² “We met when I was 24 years old and she was 17,” he says. “The fact that I was poor did not bother my father-in-law”, he adds.

Perhaps she saw in him a strong character, one that led him not to abandon his wife and children, and to shun from smoking and drinking. “Beer only, and by force”, he says.

“Chepito” is stubborn. Stubborn in both good and bad ways. For example, he has not stopped working in the sugar mill, the corner store and still does some fieldwork, because he is convinced that if stops doing these things, that will be the “end of it”. But he also insists on going as far as continuing to climb trees. And just a few days ago his children ran to get him off the top of the house, where he had gone to repair tiles.

His religion is to do no harm to anyone and to help anyone he can, he says. That’s why he doesn’t go to church. Sometimes neighbors pass by and from the street they shout:

“Chepitó, when are you going to start going to church?”

And he, rebellious as always, looks up and answers:

“When priests start getting married!”

² As a matter of fact, Paula, as noted at the very beginning of this book, passed away on February 18, 2018, and not on February 3rd. However, Don Francisco says that for him, she died on February 3rd, that is on the day that she left their home to be hospitalized in León.

History of Zelaya Blandón Family



The sugar cane mill -- 'trapiche' -- on La Caldera farm

Appendix 2 – The sugarcane juice boils, swirls, and foams...

[La Prensa](https://www.laprensa.com.ni/2004/09/05/nacionales/922284-el-guarapo-hierve-palpita-popea)

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September 5, 2004

By Mario Fulvio Espinosa

Criiii ... criiii ... criii ... criii ... criii ... The screeching is loud, persistent, monotonous. One can hear it from quite a distance as one approaches, on a rugged flagstone strewn path, the farm of Francisco Zelaya where a 100 year-old artefact known as the ‘trapiche’ is busy milling sugarcane.

A shed of blackened wood overlooks the oven where the sugarcane juice – el guarapo – is boiling, as a honey smelling mist fills the small place and rises and drifts towards paths and mountains, following the direction dictated by the wind.

Inside the smoky atmosphere of the small shed, men move like ghosts, some putting wood in the fire, others stirring the sugarcane juice that swirls and foams in the big cauldrons, others preparing the molds that still others fill with the boiling, and every sweeter and thicker juice.

The sugar mill is in the nearby patio. Two yokes of oxen, each guided by a worker, walk in circles pulling the beams that activate, in the center, the artisanal crusher, two large cylinders of fine wood that, as they turn in opposite directions, crush the sugarcane stalks being fed into them, portion by portion, by an expert worker. A jet of sugarcane juice comes out from under the machine, flowing into special containers to be used in the boiling process.

We are in the area of the hamlet of El Espino, Cinco Pinos. We are in the heart of harvest time and observing the sugar mill produced in 1902 by Mr. Filiberto Zelaya, who left it for his descendants. With the passage of time, it is now owned by his grandson, Don Francisco Zelaya Mejía.

“During its 104 years of existence this wood-built mill has seen both good and bad times. Hurricanes sometimes devastated the sugarcane fields, but that led us to work harder. I would plant new fields. I worked a lot transporting and milling and milling,” comments Don Chico with humble pride. (The two following paragraphs, I was unable to translate, Elmer)

“What are the parts of a sugarcane mill?” we ask. A good mill has, like cannons, its "carriages"; its "chains" connecting the long poles to the turbine that the oxen rotate as they walk; the “wedge”, the peg, and the ‘almijarra’.

We work in two teams. Each team works fifteen days and counts on its helpers and four oxen. With two pairs of oxen one produces three boiling processes, and with the other two a total of six. Each team produces thirty cans of sugar cane juice.

Appendix 3 – Family’s Letter of Thanks

El Espino, Cinco Pinos
December 27, 2006

Representatives of Dawson College – Montreal, Canada
Especially: Mr. Ovide Bastien
Coordinator of the Brigade of our Canadian Friends

Extensive to: *Christina Chough, Natasha Chenier, Marion Dulude, Andrea Grant, Lauren Walshe, Kyra Wilcock and others who collaborated in this small and meaningful tribute to the Nicaraguan family. We say ‘the Nicaraguan family’ because we, the Zelaya Blandón Family, are not the exception but the privileged ones that you happened to contact.*

With all humility and consideration, we cannot find the words to recognize the effort and love with which you honored our family.

Friends and fellow Canadians, we are writing to you through this letter to thank you for such a magnificent research project on the history of our family. We hope that it will serve as an example of how other families in Nicaragua are fighting for the common good and are in solidarity with those who have access to this document. and in solidarity. Rest assured, dear friends, that as long as we live we will remain united in our family in the struggle for a better world. Our parents showed us, in all humility, the way, and each one will pass the torch on to our children.

Thank you, friends, for this wonderful gesture. We will not disappoint you, especially now that we have achieved the triumph of the FSLN and will continue moving ahead within the framework of the solidarity of our Nicaraguan

History of Zelaya Blandón Family

brothers and continue to develop our friendship with you, Canadian brothers.

May this research project that you managed to carry out, despite cultural differences, enlighten Dawson College students and help them understand, through this X-ray of a Nicaraguan family, all the difficulties that we face in the technological, economic, and scientific realms, in our struggle to develop and progress. A struggle whose very foundation rests on the family unit.

Thank you, a thousand times, Ovide, our friend. We all wish you success in the New Year and do not forget that here you will always have some unconditional friends.

Fraternally,

Familia Zelaya – Blandón

José Francisco J. F. Zelaya B

Cruz Blandón Cruz Blandón

Ariel Ariel

Edelberto Edelberto

Julian Julian

Elmer Elmer

Domitila Domitila

Lester Lester

Thelma Thelma

Nellys Nellys