

Fortunato Velásquez  
La Paz, La Paz, Honduras  
porosvato@hotmail.com  
www.chuchoroto.com  
011-504-9566-0635

A Biographical Memoir

### Met the Nun: Lost my Heart

They had been kicked out of their home. That's how I met her. A Peace Corps Volunteer completing his two-year service introduced me to Sister Edith and the children. It was almost night when he led me to the abandoned building, Nick had two months to go before returning to the States: Portland, Oregon. My two-year tour had just begun.

We arrived as the sun's last fading rays set on a group of little children with dirty, sweat-streaked faces who were moving stones and trash, the nun and an older neighborhood kid shoveled dirt and garbage using two ancient shovels with rusty blades into a single creaky wheelbarrow, the scene enveloped in clouds of dust. In her stained nun's habit she worked in the light of a rising full moon, shovel in her hands. Sister Edith looked up as we approached, surrounded by a dozen or so curious kids.

That's how it began. A Peace Corps adventure.

The Peace Corps, a division of the US State Department established by President John F. Kennedy in 1966, brought me to this Third World country. An adventure indeed. Honduras, named by Cristobal Colon in 1502 near modern-day Trujillo, is the only place the murdering conquistador and his gang of Spanish adventuring pirates put foot on the American mainland. The name the invader chose means "Depths" for the deep waters off its coast. Weeks after my arrival the country was shaken by a 6.8 earthquake with its epicenter in the Caribbean Sea about eighty miles from where I would be assigned after field based training, and a month after that its

citizens experienced a coup d'état; the country's president shuffled out the back door to Costa Rica in his pajamas at 3 a.m. by his own army generals.

On February 24, 2009, our party, a group of fifty mostly 20-something Peace Corps Volunteer Trainees (PCVTs), left our Washington D.C. hotel at the darkest hour of night. Departing on a bus from the hotel we arrived at the airport at 3 a.m. where we huddled and milled around without guidance. After a long period of disorganized confusion the loaded plane finally lumbered out of the Washington D.C. sky. As the plane swooshed into the opening pink dawn, I thought with a sinking-stomach feeling: what the hell have I gotten myself into.

A few hours later, the plane began its descent to land in another country, the second poorest country in the western hemisphere after Haiti where we would live for the next two years, if everything went well. That things often do not go well is an indelible partial nexus of this narrative. After all, my compañeros and I were "Trainees." Mistakes happen. People mature and change. Results matter. Only six of our original health care project party of fifteen completed their tours.

In the early afternoon sun I looked out the plane's window at a scene that reminded me of Tijuana, México. The Boeing 757 slowed and with a heavy jerk skidded its tires down onto the tarmac and we taxied into Toncontin Airport, Tegucigalpa, Honduras (that is, Ondúras to you non-Spanish readers. One never pronounces the "H", accent on the ú).

Following the deplaning mini melee, bumped and jostled through the crowds bottle-necked at airport customs, we pushed our way toward the loading of our large quantity of luggage onto several Peace Corps vehicles. Our confused group herded together, we were transported by attentive Peace Corps personnel to Campo Zarabanda, a leased educational center located in the

mountains above the capital city where we trainees were to meet our host families. In the weeks ahead our Peace Corps teachers were to become engaged with each individual trainee in a continuous process of focused intensive training by Hondurans that included Honduran cultural values and history, security, Spanish language classes, as well as Peace Corps rules and regulations, amongst numerous other miniscule administrative details. No doubt about it, the Peace Corps staff, mostly Hondurans, were committed top-notch organizers and teachers and helped us novatos (rookies) find our way.

After three weeks of fast-paced orientation and rules and regulations at Campo Zarabanda we were to be moved to three separate sites. The Business Project trainees would be going to Ojojona. The Water and Sanitation Project would be sent to Prespire. And my project, fifteen trainees in the Health Project, in La Paz, La Paz would be where we would enter Field Based Training (FBT) for eleven weeks (I'm ex-military and this whole experience resembled my U.S. Air Force boot camp.) Except we didn't live in barracks.

During the Campo Zarabanda orientation training and the Field Based Training periods it had been arranged for each trainee to live with a Honduran family. The Peace Corps had a housing person on staff to visit and screen potential native citizen participants for suitability. She traveled all over the country. Once a family had been selected, the trainee's room and board would be paid monthly. A more important criteria was that no English would be spoken to the trainee, not that any of the selected families could speak English. I was lucky enough to have been assigned to three of the finest families during my six-month probationary period that I have ever known; families with whom to the present day I continue to remain in regular contact. These local families had been selected by Honduran PC staff after thorough background investigations. This

key to the Peace Corps Trainees integration process into the Spanish-speaking community served as a bridge into the community's daily functions. In essence each trainee was being provided room and board by either a responsible leading citizen or community leader; and also the important contact with their families and friends. In the country's smaller aldeas (villages), families competed for the opportunity of having a Peace Corps Volunteer living in their community for two years.

During this period I met Nick and Sister Edith.

A couple of days after I arrived in La Paz, Nick asked me if I and the other trainees would like to help the nun and the children remove trash, dirt, and garbage from the dilapidated, ruinous building that had been used for years as the neighborhood dump. I learned later from Sister Edith that she had been forced to vacate her initial orphanage building located next door to the Governor's office which had been provided to her by the previous City Council's alcalde (mayor). The new alcalde wanted to turn the property into a museum. The new council in a spirit of tainted generosity granted Sister Edith consent to house abused and orphaned children in the abandoned ruins of the former Escuela Parroquial, an old school building run by the community's Franciscan nun congregation, who abandoned the building after they built another school complex elsewhere.

Many of the city's children in years past had attended classes at the Escuela Parroquial, including Sister Edith who at the age of 15 joined the Franciscan congregation and left her home in Cane (Khán-eh) to become a nun and live in the La Paz convent with other novitiates. Fate would have her resign from the Franciscan order after fifteen years to found the mission to which she chose to dedicate her life. She would continue to care for the city's abandoned, rejected and

neglected at-risk children in the building complex where she had formerly been a student, after cleaning up the site. A task many in the community thought impossible.

The next morning when I asked the Health Project Trainee class if they would be willing to help the nun and a bunch of orphans on Saturdays with the major clean-up job of their new home, everyone said: YES! I mean, we were the Peace Corps. Right?

So, fifteen of us, more or less, decided to meet early every Saturday morning at the Hogar San José's new living quarters, such as they were. It was Easter week when we first gathered as a clean-up team. That first Saturday we PCVTs took a long look around in every direction at the wasted ground before us. We saw caved in adobe walls everywhere and no roofing on any of the remaining standing buildings at the abandoned former school site. Garbage heaped in mounds and immense piles of dirt and other scattered trash were piled everywhere inside and outside the obliterated what-remained-as rooms.

I believe the fifteen new Peace Corps Trainees (that was the only Saturday all fifteen showed up) met their mettle that day. To their credit they exceeded muster, everyone contributed 100%. We worked and sweat and got filthy dirty. We worked our asses off, the day hot as blazes. As hot as only tropical La Paz, La Paz, Honduras can be at Easter week.

Since we only had two wheelbarrows (I got my host family to lend us some additional tools) everyone, older kids and every adult including the nun's father filled 5-gallon plastic buckets with dirt and garbage from huge piles everywhere and carried them, two buckets to a person, to the dusty makeshift receiving point where another group with pickaxes, shovels, and hoes spread and smoothed the rough contents to fill several dangerous huge holes on the premises that Sister Edith wanted leveled. Others hacked and dug with a couple of borrowed piochas (pickaxes) at

large submerged stones wrenched loose after much vigorous tugging, then dragged the boulders to each hole rolling them in creating thicker dust clouds. A continuous moving landscape of sweating, tiring PCVTs shoveling or carrying dirt along with the children and the nun and her father for hours raised a permanent dust landscape that mixed with the smoke of three or four burning piles of garbage that wafted across that bombed-out-looking powdery pastoral scene; a smelly, smokey, surreal portent, the significance of which the author would not recall until much later. We did that for ten weeks: every Saturday. Eight months later, a visiting Peace Corps Volunteer who joined our First Annual Thanksgiving Dinner commented, on entering the Children's Home for the first time, that the premises looked like a bombed out World War II scene.

During Field Based Training we, now fourteen, Health Project trainees had been divided into two sections based on our Spanish language proficiency. The advanced rating had been assigned to five of us, the most fluent in the class. The entire fifty-person trainee class had been labelled H-14 by the government to differentiate it from next and previous groups of approximately fifty new eager trainees who arrived every six months in a continuous rotation:: military organization, remember? There were three fluency ratings: Novato. Green beans, knew nothing; Intermedio. Beginning to formulate sentences to have a semi-intelligent conversation; Superior. That was me and four of my compañeros, fluent enough that we were permitted to have a more open, self-managed training schedule. Our goal was to work with local resources to select a project subject. Of course our less fluent compañeros were also each being integrated into Hispanic America burgeoned by daily Spanish language classes while we all attended to activities of daily living as incoming new foreign persons accepted into Spanish-speaking families sharing meals

and conversation and fostering mutual insights, which is what the Peace Corps is all about.

In structured training groups the PCVTs participated in Peace Corps-staff organized teaching opportunities giving charlas (talks) to local students, in secondary schools, but on occasion in select primary school classes, concerning Sexually Transmitted Infections; in particular about the transmission of HIV. Additional charlas to community gatherings focused on maternal and child care, nutrition and malnutrition, dehydration, obstetric hygiene for rural midwives, emergency signs and intervention, and well baby evaluation. Most everyone tried to absorb the technical information they would be using in the field, review info for me, a Registered Nurse.

Eleven weeks later we future Peace Corps Volunteers were ready to leave La Paz and received assignments to rural communities all over the country.

When asked by the project manager where I wanted to be posted after Field Based Training, I said La Paz. I didn't want to leave. I wanted to stay and work at the orphanage with the nun and the children that had been my Field Based Project. At graduation I was required to write and present a well received report to my peers, in conjunction with those of the other advanced-language trainees, describing my project's initiation and development.

Years earlier, when asked my first preference for assignment after completing military boot camp, my choice was also ignored. Peace Corps staff assigned me to Honduras' North Coast. All forty-nine of us attended an afternoon celebration certifying us as official United States of America Peace Corps Volunteers at the American Embassy in Tegucigalpa. At predawn the following morning — having explained my leavetaking to the nun and the kids before leaving La Paz at a despedida (asking one's leave) — the day after the embassy ceremony, I boarded a bus and seven hours later I and my new Honduras counterpart were deposited at the municipio of La

Masica located in the departamento of Atlantida. Neither the nun or the children or me expected that we would ever meet again. Life is an illusion.

Honduras' North Coast with spectacular beaches and offshore Caribbean islands is a beautiful and different environment than the mountainous interior. The geography is tropical, verdant and fertile. On the humid coastal plain everything is green all year round. There are so many trees. Extensive coconut, banana, palm oil and pineapple field plantations and huge expanses of indigenous forest line the two-lane road that skirts the San Pedro Sula metropolis to parallel the sea at varying distances from the water until it reaches the seaside city of Trujillo, located on the edge of the vast roadless wilderness called La Mosquitia, a hop, skip and a jump from Colombia. Trujillo was the only spot on the western hemisphere mainland where mercenary explorer Cristobal Colón, an Italian in Spanish service, set foot on his fourth and last voyage to the "New World" after having commenced the rape and destruction of the Caribbean world's indigenous inhabitants; which opened the door for the subjugation of the rest of indigenous America from North America to South America by greedy, murderous, colonial slaveholding European powers.

The coastal weather exudes the definition of tropical. At midday the humid heat is stifling, afternoons often bring drenching rains during the rainy season, and evenings cool somewhat. Watching the flaming sun set on the Caribbean shore with an ice cold beer in hand after an excellent seafood dinner stimulates deep thoughts and has one half-planning on establishing a permanent place on this beautiful land.

La Masica, my new home, is a small municipio of about 25,000 persons located in the departamento of Atlántida about 30 to 40 minutes from the administrative government seat at La Ceiba: la cabecera. I had no preconceptions about how conditions would be like before I arrived.



Granted, Peace Corps would guarantee safety and a somewhat clean living area. Once I arrived at my new assignment, however, I discovered that it reminded me of living on a farm in the middle of a barrio. There were two paved streets in town. Wandering burros, cows, chickens, ducks and pigs munching grass, roadside trash and bugs, grunted and greeted me in passing as I walked the dirt roads to the Health Clinic every morning. What better company does one need?

I lived in La Masica for three months. Two weeks after I arrived, on May 28th, a 6.8 monster earthquake woke me at 3 a.m., the bed shaking as I, wide-eyed, staring around in the dark, grabbed its sides rocking back and forth, up and down, me thinking of that spooky movie *The Exorcist*.

The next month, I sat in La Ceiba's central park having been treated at a Peace Corps-approved private hospital for a lung infection for three days when all hell broke loose. Coup d'état! June 28th. In an instant armed military and police responded in force. Everywhere camouflage-uniformed young men — teenagers — trucked to the scene in military vehicles, carrying AK47s, blocked streets and circled hundreds of yelling demonstrators, guns at the ready. The streets filled with thousands of angry citizens, mobs burning trees and garbage in open spaces. Others in large crowds milled around the central park in front of the alcaldía, the city's government center, waving placards and homemade signs, shouting and jeering at feckless election officials and corruption, their leaders' bullhorns spurring them on.

My host mom from La Paz called me at that very moment I observed at first hand the country's political convulsion. I had just finished breakfast.

She asked me: "Where are you?"

"Sitting in the central park in La Ceiba. Why?"

“What’s happening?” she replied.

“There are soldiers with guns all around and crowds of people yelling and shouting.”

“Get out of there!” she told me.

“Why?”

“Those soldiers and police could hurt you. Leave, now!”

Needless to say I hurried back to my hotel to watch the coup unfold on television, citizens’ reactions immediate and violent. President Zelaya had been roused from his bed at the presidential palace at 3:00 a.m. and frogmarched to a waiting car in his pajamas, then to the US air base at Palmerola where a military plane whisked him out of the country to Costa Rica. I learned all this in the days ahead.

Early the next morning I boarded a rapidito busito intending to return to La Masica. The only bridge heading north had been blocked by demonstrators burning tires and trees in the middle of the main highway. In a quick instant the bus driver swerved off the pavement from behind the long, long-waiting line, sped down a dirt road paralleling the river and plunged into the stone-filled shallow water where other brave souls were trying their luck, and proceeded to ram his way across. I looked out the window and mentally yelled YEAH! in the crowded coach as the busito ploughed through axle-deep water and jerked and skidded its way up the steep embankment and onto the road on the other side of the broad Rio Danto. Half an hour later we sped into La Masica. Me after five days in La Ceiba undergoing medical treatment.

While all this was happening in my Peace Corps life, I had been introduced to the staff at the local La Masica Community Health Clinic and at the Colegio (high school) Instituto Gonzalo Rodriguez, meeting folks and trying to identify where I might fit in adhering to the Peace Corps

mission statement.

As I settled into my new assignment, I participated in a few medical brigades organized by the Centro de Salud de La Masica. When the brigades discovered my Registered Nurse credentials I was put to work taking vital signs and triaging patients. Various medical brigades from the States arrive for a week or so to different parts of the country to provide basic health services and many Hondurans form long lines to receive tylenol, vitamins, iron supplements, etcetera, for their acute and chronic ills. At one free clinic, a middle-aged woman presented who had a large, moist, red-blue tumor on the middle of her forehead. Obvious that the dreadful growth must have been painful, the free clinic could, of course, do nothing for the poor lady.

Some of the native mountain folk travel long distances, walking, often by horse, burro or bicycle to present themselves before the much-admired free gringo medicine clinic. And there are also seaside folk. Families live along the inland sea tributaries and travel by small boats and there are more distant families who actually live on high points in the shallows on the edges of the sea and plan their travels according to the movements of the tides. I looked in wonder the first time I saw a small caravan of four horses wading in from the sea, a mother and father and five children riding in thigh-high seawater to buy provisions at the local rural pulpería (grocery). On another occasion I clung to the side of a small lancha (boat) that sank to its gunwales after a dozen persons climbed in to travel to an alcalde-led cabildo abierto, a community meeting, situated in a home on the estuary. The seawater highway its only access, the waves lapped at my gripped fist. With the other hand I pressed my computer tight against my chest praying we wouldn't sink. As I cast wary eyes at the surging intertidal water the lancha's pilot at the helm of its half-horsepower outboard motor yelled: "Look, monkeys!" Every face shot skyward, probing

the high branches in the tall trees bordering the dense, wooded banks. The lancha rocked from side to side as the passengers shifted in their seats, craning necks to get a better view. We were told manatees were common in the area but we never saw one.

Before the opportunity to become involved with the La Masica high school curriculum presented itself I began meeting in La Ceiba with the Atlántida Regional Hospital's HIV clinic after walking in, introducing myself and my Peace Corps role, and asking if I could participate in group counseling sessions. I explained that I received training as a counselor while enrolled in the Family Nurse Practitioner Program at the University of California, Davis, School of Medicine. To my surprise, the clinic director said yes.

The experience is one of the highlights of my Peace Corps experience. The Regional Hospital Atlántida had a CAI clinic (Centro de Atención Integral) that provided services to the country's — in particular the North Coast's — growing HIV positive population. The Hospital Atlántida's CAI clinic had on staff two physicians, a social worker, four nurses, a psychologist and a psychologist intern. The patient caseload was huge, fluid and dynamic. Quite a contrast to the La Paz CAI clinic that was established in 2011 at the Hospital Roberto Suazo Córdoba in La Paz after my debilitating accident on February 9, 2011 that resulted in seven surgeries on my right elbow and incapacitated me for 11 months.

Every Monday and Tuesday morning at 7 a.m. sharp a mandatory group counseling session convened for newly diagnosed patients and for established patients arriving to pick up their month's supply of antiretroviral drugs.

The North Coast where I lived had the highest incidence of HIV positive cases in the country. Not only that, Honduras has the largest HIV positive population in Central America. I therefore

began researching resource groups available on the North Coast that dealt with the growing HIV positive problem and with the inevitable AIDS growth as well. Who was ministering to these souls? Who else was providing counseling? Support groups? Assistance with housing and employment? This group of individuals faced daunting obstacles among the local populace. There existed much prejudice, discrimination, malicious gossip, in the neighborhoods where someone was known to have contracted the infection. Due to ignorance, misinformation, myths and downright meanness people had been assaulted and forced to move, leave their homes and families, often the families being ostracized as well. I remember one HIV positive woman's story. She had lived in a small mountain aldea with no basic services: no electricity, no clean water, no sewage, no police, no firemen, no medical clinic. Illiteracy with its resultant repercussions is widespread in those hamlets. The men, whose machismo outlook on family life is dominant, frequent prostitutes. The villagers set fire to her house one night with she and her family in it; she fled with her two young daughters to save their lives, her HIV-infected husband remaining behind having accused her of infecting him with the virus. The philanderer soon afterward also left the village absconding north to the US. No telling how many people he infected there.

I could not locate a central national directory that dealt with the HIV outbreak. I did learn that there were several scattered small groups that focused on assisting select local populations. So I decided to begin contacting those groups that did exist on the North Coast on an individual basis with a goal of creating a comprehensive directory where every group was listed with the individuals available who one could contact for educational and referral information. Some groups were more effective than others but at the very least they could be listed as to

geographical availability and services provided and population groups targeted as well as funding sources.

The Regional Hospital's CAI Clinic staff psychologist who managed the support groups sponsored me and encouraged me to participate and interact with the patients. So I did. I learned that there were more than a few La Masica residents receiving treatment, their identities confidential due to the gossip prevalent in a small community; the population of La Ceiba is 200,000. Every Monday and Tuesday morning I participated several times, which was thrilling for me. I gained enough confidence to be allowed to help manage a group after having observed and learned from clinic colleagues Honduran interviewing techniques, similar to interviewing techniques I learned in the States after almost two years of study in the Family Nurse Practitioner Program where we students were taught interviewing and diagnostic skills.

Alas, my efforts were trumped. After three months assigned to La Masica, the Peace Corps denied me further growth. The program manager ordered me to evacuate my site and just like that to desert the contacts I had established: a summary order to leave my colleagues, our patients. My friends in La Masica, the Jovenes Sin Fronteras (Youth Without Frontiers), were so gracious about it. The Jovenes Sin Fronteras were a United Nations funded organization established to educate the municipality's youth in primary and secondary schools about HIV transmission and prevention. I had worked with the three staff persons, and the high school teacher with whom I was going to expand into the local high school, on several community presentations. Their reactions and mine to theirs broke my heart. We all cried.

It angered me. I had made friends. I hadn't yet started my high school HIV intervention program.

Why?

The Peace Corps Country Director decided to close down a coastal strip on the North Coast known among locals as the narco-trafficante corridor. Every week small plane flights dropped contraband from the sky. I could hear the low-flying airplane motors as they flew overhead in my sector (different flights happened all up and down the coast) and dropped their illicit cocaine cargo on the outskirts of La Masica where the recovered fardos (large bundles) were collected by waiting henchmen and redistributed. One night one of those planes crashed and many citizens descended on the wreckage like wolves eager to pilfer what they could before the authorities arrived, including one church pastor I was told.

After a several-months-long investigation, Peace Corps security staff declared off limits to Peace Corps Volunteers the area from La Mosquitia, adjacent to the Nicaraguan Caribbean coast, to San Pedro Sula near the Guatemalan and Belize borders. Forthwith five of us newest Peace Corps Volunteers living on or near the North Coast were pulled out and posted inland.

That's how I returned to La Paz.