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# With Our Own Two Hands



*"I had to do what I could, whatever way. If no one else would help me...I guess I'd do whatever I could with my own two hands...to try to bring about some change to the living standards of the Nicaraguans."*

- Irving Bablitz, 1985

Irving Bablitz had visited Nicaragua a year earlier. He found countless acres of agricultural soil lying fallow, a nation of people scarcely able to feed itself, and scores of farm implements idle for lack of repair. The agricultural economy was broken and he was determined he could do something to fix it.

This documentary film is an excellent introduction to some of the realities found by Third World people laboring in the shadow of war. Its greatest value lies in its demonstration of how a simple gesture of good will can cross international barriers to help others.



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## FARMERS HELPING FARMERS

On his return to Canada, Irving Bablitz canvassed prairie farming communities for support. The response was a unique fund-raising drive that raised \$180,000 through auctions and other community events, private donations, and through assistance from Oxfam, the Mennonite Central Committee, CIDA, the Government of Alberta, and several church agencies. With fifteen tons of tools and equipment for the repair of broken farm machinery, sixteen Canadian farmers arrived in Rivas, Nicaragua, in January, 1985. From that point on, it was farmers helping farmers.

In Nicaragua, hardware and transportation were in short supply. Using the ingenuity for which farmers are famous, the Canadians found ways to build a repair shop that doubled as a training center for Nicaraguan farmers. When they discovered that much of the farm equipment was too far gone to be brought to the shop, they devised a mobile repair unit that could travel to the farm.

Some of the Canadians had never travelled abroad. At first, they found the food, housing and working conditions to be strange and discomforting. But the Nicaraguans' warmth, positive outlook and willingness to learn made it possible for their Canadian peers to complete their task.



### NICARAGUA: BACKGROUND

A country nestled between Costa Rica to the south and Honduras to the north, Nicaragua was ruled by the Somoza family dictatorship for over forty years. That government was finally overthrown in July 1979 by the Sandinista National Liberation Front (FSLN), a popular movement that took its name from Augusto Cesar Sandino, a revolutionary and nationalist strongly opposed to U.S. intervention in Nicaragua; he was assassinated in 1934 by Somoza's forces.

Since the 1979 revolution, the Sandinista government has made improvements in health care, progress towards economic reform, and dramatically increased the literacy rate (the Sandinista government received a UNESCO award for the latter efforts.) However Nicaragua continues to live under conditions of war. The counter-revolutionaries, or Contras, led by former members of Somoza's National Guard and funded by the U.S. government, continuously attack Nicaraguan territory from their hideouts in Honduras. Their constant invasions have forced the Nicaraguan government to maintain an army of over 50,000 and this conflict has seriously hampered the Sandinista efforts at social reform and economic reconstruction. Most people in the country continue to live in poverty.



*Through a variety of aid programs, Canadian assistance from 1981 to 1986 totalled over \$50 million, including nearly \$9 million from non-government organizations. Many Canadian groups, including Farmers for Peace, continue to provide assistance.*



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## FARMERS FOR PEACE

The organization Farmers for Peace was formed subsequent to the 1985 project we see in the film. Those involved in the fundraising and the men who went to Nicaragua decided to form a group that could sustain a program of support for the Nicaraguans.

A Farmers for Peace group returned to Nicaragua in February 1986 with a shop pre-built in Alberta that they assembled to full operating capacity in two months. Located in Jinotega, this shop includes a complete diesel engine repair unit and is staffed by over thirty Nicaraguans. A mechanics' training school is also being built in Jinotega.

During the summer of 1986, Farmers for Peace funded and provided materials to re-house a co-operative of seventy families, and provided cattle to assist in agricultural re-development. They also arranged for a transfer of goats donated by members of the Alberta Goat Breeder's Association to an agricultural school at Esteli, where farmers are trained in the care and breeding of the animals.

By March 1987, the group had erected a kindergarten in Jinotega, almost finished a carpenter shop and training centre, and poured the foundation for a hospital and drug store storage depot. A feasibility study for a planned sawmill was completed, and its construction will soon begin. This will provide a needed infrastructure in the community as the people work towards economic recovery. Various other projects have been finished, and others are planned for the future.



*Canadian farmers' Technical Brigade joined the crowd to watch the Inauguration of President Daniel Ortega in January 1985 in Managua.*

## Suggested Audiences:

1. Education: Social Studies, grades 7 to 13
2. Non-Government Organizations (NGOs) and Community Groups
3. Farm Organizations
4. Church Groups

## Post-Screening Questions

1. What aspect of this film stands out for you?
2. Why have these Canadian farmers become involved in Nicaragua?
3. What problems did they have to overcome?
4. Were you to go to work in Nicaragua, with what types of things might you have difficulty coping?
5. How did the Canadian farmers organize themselves to increase their effectiveness?
6. In terms of the project seen in the film, what were the strengths and weaknesses of the people of Rivas?
7. How has the military and political situation affected the lives of the Nicaraguans you see in the film? In what way does this situation touch the Canadians?
8. What development approach was adopted by the Canadian farmers? Can you think of other styles of development aid that might also be effective?
9. How were the people of Rivas affected by the work of the Canadians? How were the Canadians affected by their experience in Rivas?
10. To what extent would a political situation such as that in Nicaragua affect your willingness to support projects like the one documented in the film?

## Suggested Activities

1. Choose three or four organizations, such as Farmers for Peace and do an in-depth study of their activities in a less-developed country. Attempt to draw conclusions about the effectiveness of their actions.
  2. Debate the following statement: People in countries such as Nicaragua should not be helped until the country is at peace and the political situation clarified.
  3. In small groups, discuss whether involvement in helping the people of Nicaragua constitutes a valid expression of your religious or moral beliefs.
  4. Invite speakers from Farmers for Peace or one of the many organizations involved in Nicaragua to your classroom, group or church meetings to speak on the situation in Nicaragua.
  5. Compare literacy rates, available health care and economic opportunities under the Somoza and Sandinista governments.
  6. Discuss the effect of the war on economic development.
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## Suggested Reading

1. "The Republic of Nicaragua," an Amnesty International Report, 10-15 May 1976, U.S.A., 1977.
2. Nicaragua: The Human Rights Record, London, 1986.
3. "Nicaragua: Do or die time for the Contras," Canada and the World, February 1987.
4. "Human Rights in Nicaragua, Yesterday and Today," International Commission of Jurists, 1980.
5. "Nicaraguan Elections: Background, Analysis and Future Prospects," Canadian Dimension, March/April/1985.
6. "Nicaragua: Revolution Plus One," Canadian Forum, October 1980.
7. "The Battle for Nicaragua," MacLean's, February 23, 1987.
8. "Nicaragua: Nation in Conflict," National Geographic, December 1985.
9. Central American Update (416) 533-4221  
Box 2207, Station P  
Toronto, Ontario M5S 2T2
10. Envio  
Central American Historical Institute  
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Special Thanks to **The Canadian Farmers For Peace**

For information on Canadian government aid, church projects and the activities of other organizations in Nicaragua, the following list will be helpful.

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