

# THE BURLINGTON/ PUERTO CABEZAS SISTER CITY PROGRAM

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Report on the Sister City delegation to Puerto Cabezas, February 5 - March 5, 2014  
Meghan O'Rourke, Sylvan Zeitlyn, Dan Higgins & Jane Kramer

The focus of the trip was support for community video producers in Bilwi, both with training and equipment. Since our first video workshop there in 2000 the sister city program has maintained strong ties with the producers of community television. When Dennis Mairena, director of CADPE's fledgling Canal 22, requested training help from Burlington it was clear that board member Meghan O'Rourke would be a perfect choice. Meghan has for years overseen training at Burlington's Channel 17, and this winter she has been teaching an after school class at the Sustainability Academy with a focus on using video and learning about Puerto Cabezas. With some convincing, Meghan agreed to travel to Bilwi with Jane and me and with her eleven-year old son Sylvan.

Before leaving Vermont we had the good fortune of obtaining generous donations of video equipment no longer being used by organizations in Burlington. Jay Hoffman, at the Tuttle Middle School in South Burlington, donated mini-dv Canon and Panasonic cameras that have been replaced in his teaching by newer SDHC card cameras, as well as an assortment of professional tripods, cables, cassettes and microphones no longer used. Scott Campitelli at RETN donated a broadcast quality Panasonic Camera, with accessories, as well as a large supply of mini-dv cassettes. This equipment, while no longer used by these organizations, provides a big step up in quality for the videographers in Puerto Cabezas. Many thanks to Jay Hoffman and Scott Campitelli for support to their sister city counterparts in Bilwi.

Our distribution of equipment was guided by channel neutrality, giving two Canon cameras and a tripod to the crew at URACCAN's Canal 5, and two Panasonic cameras and a tripod to the crew at CADPI's Canal 22. A third Panasonic we gave to Julio Bordas, who has been doing independent video with the sister city program since our first workshop in the year 2000. We also left two small handheld camcorders, one with Julio for his classes with children, and another with Margarita Antonio for documenting the activities of the Mujeres Creativas group.

Meghan used her time in Bilwi to great advantage. The week before we left Burlington her class produced a video interview with Burlington Mayor Miro Weinberger, including a message to the people of Puerto Cabezas, that was broadcast on Bilwi's Canal 22 TV soon after our arrival. In a gesture of symmetry, we set up a video interview with Port's vice mayor Anicia Matamoros, with Sylvan doing the questioning. Each morning Meghan attended staff meetings at Canal 22, offered suggestions for improving workflow, helped with technical problems in the studio, and worked with the crew on projects in the field. After Meghan left, Jane and I returned to the less ambitious agenda of drifting around town, reconnecting with old contacts, and discovering new aspects of community. One of the young editors working at Canal 22 became fascinated with my 1987 book, *Sister City: Side by Side*, and encouraged me to revisit subjects in the book and record what those locations look like now. I rephotographed several groups, including firemen posing in front of their extraordinary new building donated by the government of Russia. I also photographed the woman from the cover of the book who, with her daughter, now has not just a snack bar but a full restaurant downtown.

The sister city program functions best as an umbrella under which residents of our two communities can make connections based on mutual interests. Video exchange has been an important way of introducing people to their sister city counterparts and we brought back several new videos for showing in Vermont. Julio gave us a documentary he had made on the Marijn Foundation theater arts project that the sister city board sponsored last year. In it puppet making was used to enable young girls to find voices of self-expression. Julio also gave us a video he produced on the Palo de Mayo dances, as well as a documentary on one of the Mujeres Creativas workshops. Meghan produced a video on the Baptist pastor's efforts at recycling plastic bottles in Port: <http://vimeo.com/88298926>. And Jane and I taught a video class for members of the Mujeres Creativas group who used the camera to document the painting of a mural they were making on the wall of a building for the blind.

The staff of Canales 5 and 22 also downloaded video files for us to bring back to Vermont. These included footage from a multicultural performance involving dance, song, story telling and poetry, representing the four cultures (Miskito, Mayagna, Meztizo, and Creole). One of my favorite pieces was the Miskitu *Usus Mairen* dance, celebrating in costume and movement the importance of vultures in keeping the environment clean. Finally, I recorded long time sister city friend Remigio Hodgson singing some of his songs. Remigio's music touches a wide range of issues: gender relationships (mi ropa), humor (beans), and horrors of war (river running down). Remigio told us his dream is to find some musicians to collaborate with to develop his songs to a new musical level. (He is especially eager to work with someone playing slide guitar).

Our job, as a sister city board, is to reach out and make appropriate introductions to Vermonters of their counterparts in Puerto Cabezas. Are there dancers out there who would enjoy responding to the vulture dance, possible connections within the fire department, teachers who might offer a unit on the cultures of Nicaragua's Caribbean coast, or a musical group interested in working with Remigio on a collaborative recording of his songs? Contact us.....

*Dan* (dhiggins@uvm.edu)



Canal 22 editing room



Jay Hoffman



Margarita Watson



Dept.of Bomberos, Bilwi 2014