

THE BURLINGTON/ PUERTO CABEZAS SISTER CITY PROGRAM
WWW.UVM.EDU/SISTERCITY

Report on trip to Bilwi, Feb.10-March 10, 2015
Jane Kramer and Dan Higgins

1. ALCALDIA

We met with Mayor Reynaldo Francis, Vice Mayor Anicia Matamoros, and were introduced to city council members. Mayor Francis expressed desire to rebuild official city hall connections and gave us a letter to deliver to Mayor Weinberger in Burlington. Vice Mayor Matamoros gave us a short video about the municipality and another about a gardening project supported by Puerto Cabezas's sister city in Villa Franca, Spain, which involves distributing seeds to women in the communities for planting gardens. We also received a PDF of the current Development Plan for the municipality over the next ten years.

2. CASA CULTURA

On the anniversary of Sandino's death, the Casa Cultura hosted the second annual "Recital" with participation of local poets, performers, and musicians. I had been asked to bring down photographs I had made in Port over the years and was invited to exhibit the photographs during the event and speak about the sister city partnership. The photographs, some dating back to 1986, some as recent as last year, acted as magnets generating a wealth of stories. I was fascinated by how many people used their cell phones to re-photograph the photographs.

3. CASA CARIBE

Margarita Antonio's women's group, Mujeres Creativas, has created a new workshop and performance space in the Radio Caribe building. My exhibition moved to that space, where the prints will be exhibited through March. People were invited to the opening for an opportunity to discuss past histories and futures of the sister city program. Around forty people joined the discussion.

4. We visited with Doctor Bach's assistant Jill at the PARTNERS IN HEALTH OF MAINE Guest House. The group is currently building shelving and counters in a room at the jail for an on-site clinic so prisoners will have access to medical support while in jail.

5. IRMA CAJINA SCHOOL

We met teachers and directors at the school, which for the past two years has shared the building with the special needs school that was formerly at the convent. Students at the Irma Cajina School now meet for classes only in the afternoons. The green laptop computers distributed three years ago are scheduled to be brought back later this month. As the laptops have cameras in them, I suggested a digital photo exchange with students from one of the schools in Burlington. An idea would be for kids to make photographs of places and people important in their communities and upload images to exhibit in Burlington and Bilwi. Teachers told us again of the school's need for a comedor for serving kids lunches. An external structure (and tables) could be constructed in the yard next to the school. Dixie Lee is looking into costs of construction and how the Burlington sister city program might help with that reality.

6. CHANNELS 5 AND 22 are producing excellent community programming on Bilwi's cable TV. Both groups are using video equipment we brought down last year that was donated by South Burlington's Middle school and Burlington's Channel 16, and both did a stellar job documenting our activities in Bilwi while promoting the sister city program.

7. The month of May has been declared AFRICAN DESCENDENT MONTH by the alcaldia. As part of the celebration Dixie Lee was collecting photographs from families of important Creole people who had passed away. I accompanied him on those visits, making digital files of the photographs so they can be printed for an exhibit. Dixie has been a major partner on sister city projects since the 1980s. We have seen how hampered he has been in his work since his motorcycle was stolen two years ago so we made a Burlington sister city donation towards down payment on a new motorcycle for him to use in his work visiting communities.

8. The sister city board approved \$200 toward start up costs for Jimmy Lopez's news blog AGENDA CARIBE, a web site that is reporting daily on items of interest from the coast of Nicaragua. <<http://www.laagendadelcaribe.com/>>

9. While in Port I worked on a new series of photographs- portraits of people involved in creative activities, including performers, dancers, videographers, bread makers and musicians. I made portraits of poets, collected their poems, and made short videos of them reading their work as material for a bilingual literary collaboration with Tina Escaja.

While awareness of the Burlington/ Puerto Cabezas relationship is strong in Bilwi, it is less so in Burlington.

The challenge for the Burlington sister city group is to work on local outreach in its mission of connecting like-minded people in our two communities. The thirty-year relationship offers a unique opportunity for Vermonters to examine mutual interests through collaboration with partners in this multicultural region of Nicaragua. Expanding the board could bring in new perspectives and contacts, and the board recently authorized hiring a coordinator (preferably someone adept at utilizing social media) who might reach out to different aspects of life in Northern Vermont. Connecting a Burlington school with the Irma Cajina School offers one opportunity, as does connecting poets and musicians. Channel 15 and 17 are venues we could use more effectively, particularly with Burlington's strong connection with video producers in Port. And finding venues for exhibiting the photographs offers a further opportunity for engaging community dialogue.



Irma Cajina School, Bilwi, Puerto Cabezas