

THE BURLINGTON/ (BILWI) PUERTO CABEZAS SISTER CITY PROGRAM
15 BEECH STREET, BURLINGTON, VT 05404
WWW.UVM.EDU/SISTERCITY

2021 ANNUAL REPORT TO THE CITY OF BURLINGTON

Board Members:

Michael Bergeron, Peter Clavelle, Tina Escaja, Dan Higgins, David Hutchinson,
Jane Kramer, Patricia O’Kane, Meghan O’Rourke

MISSION

The Burlington/ Puerto Cabezas Sister City Program was established by the Burlington City Council in 1984 to support interaction between residents of Burlington and residents of Puerto Cabezas, a municipality on the Caribbean Coast of Nicaragua. While strategies have changed over the years, the sister city focus continues to be the creation of partnerships between like-minded groups and individuals in Vermont and Nicaragua.

REPORT ON HURRICANE RELIEF FUNDRAISING

Much of our efforts this year were in response to the two category 4 hurricanes, ETA and IOTA, that smashed into Puerto Cabezas during November 2020. Massive damage was done to homes, livestock, and agricultural and fishing equipment. The Sister City Program began a fundraising drive to help the residents during this emergency. The Burlington Mayor’s office led off the effort with a donation of \$1000. Local media helped get the word out, especially TV Channels 3, 5, and 17. Charlotte Dennett posted an essay on the internet publication Toward Freedom that reached people outside of Vermont.

<<https://towardfreedom.org/story/admin/a-cry-for-help-burlingtons-sister-city-in-nicaragua-is-a-major-disaster-zone/>>

The outpouring of help was impressive. Between a GoFundMe site and mailed donations we raised almost \$12,000. For how to best distribute the funds we relied on our long time partners in Bilwi.

Reports were that the government had done an excellent job during the early hours of the storm. So, acknowledging the semi-official relationship between Burlington and the municipality, we sent \$5000 to the Puerto Cabezas Alcaldia with the agreement that it be earmarked to help people from the communities who had lost their livelihoods.

Two other donations went to Kupia Kumi Aslika, an umbrella coalition of groups formed to meet needs in marginalized Miskitu communities affected by the floods, and to the Nidia White Movimiento de Mujeres, whose focus was providing shelter to women and children made homeless following the hurricane.

We sent a third donation toward replacing the tower of the Miskitu language Radio Station Yapti Tasba, an essential vehicle for communicating news and information to remote indigenous communities.

A fourth recipient was Partners in Health of Maine, a medical group providing equipment and supplies to hospitals in the region, and a fifth donation went to AquaQuest’s workshop where disabled divers learn woodworking skills so they can earn a living.

Finally, with funds left over, a donation was made to the Lapta Yula women’s organization for ongoing hurricane related projects.

The heart of the Sister City program, since its inception, has been the sharing of stories. 2021 was the third year that there were no delegations traveling from Burlington to Bilwi and personal interactions were limited. COVID-19 meant that communications were virtual, relying on email and ZOOM conference calls. The current priority is to construct relevant narratives that will engage residents of our two communities, reaching out especially to younger people who are unfamiliar with the history.

LOOKING AHEAD

We have a ZOOM call planned for later this month, with partners in Bilwi, to exchange ideas about the direction of the program. Suggestions by the Burlington board include:

- Hiring a Spanish speaking coordinator to work with the board, orchestrate events, handle social media, and interact with partners in Bilwi.
- Looking for a UVM student who speaks Spanish, perhaps an anthropology student who'd be interested in the region, who could work with the program, help with recruitment, and get credit through the UVM internship program.
- Creating a series of talks/ demos on a variety of topics of mutual interest, such as the effect climate change is having on our communities, and how it is being addressed. Or how LGBTQ groups, or indigenous and community groups critical of government policies, are treated by governmental agencies.
- Inviting a person (or group) to Burlington to meet with their counterparts, such as musicians, environmentalists, journalists, city counselors, or artists and theater performers.
- Distributing stories through exhibitions, books, and other publications. A book might highlight the work of Vermont and Nicaraguan poets, or an exhibition might present photographs of public murals from the two towns.
- Partnering with a local kitchen/restaurant to host a night of Nicaraguan Caribbean cuisine: Rondón, Vigarón, and grilled langosta.
- Providing for a regular exchange of TV programming to be shown in both locations. If someone can be found in Bilwi to partner with Town Meeting TV's youth video producers there could be an exchange of videos documenting life in both communities. To ensure regularity, the person coordinating with videographers in Bilwi should be given a paid stipend.

Finally, we are open to any ideas for introducing Burlington to its sister city in Nicaragua. The Burlington/ Puerto Cabezas partnership offers Vermonters a unique opportunity for exploring global issues through the perspectives of a long-term sister city relationship. Whatever someone's interest - arts, music, urban development, women's issues, media, or community gardening- we can arrange contacts with appropriate counterparts.

The Sister City Program is always looking to expand the board and seek members with new interests. Meetings before the pandemic took place at board member Jane Kramer's house, 15 Beech Street, in Burlington. We can be contacted through our web site:

www.uvm.edu/sistercity

Report submitted: Dan Higgins, Chair of the Board
September 4, 2021