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Winter Term Project Report:
The New Haven/León Sister City Project

I spent all of Winter Term 2005 in León, Nicaragua as a “Peace and Justice Volunteer” with the New Haven/León Sister City Project. The Peace and Justice program concerns itself with tailoring volunteer projects to individuals’ interests. Volunteers usually work in the agricultural or educational spheres. However, since I’m an art history major, the New Haven director arranged for me to do arts-related community service. I spent one week at each of three different sites. The first was a huge mosaic being made for the Museum of Traditions and Legends in León. Working with two Nicaraguans my age, I learned how to use tile-cutting tools and finished one substantial piece of the mosaic on my own. The second project was based at an Italian-funded community center called Edad de Oro (“Golden Age”); the center runs a tee shirt-making shop, the profits from which help to keep the center running. I learned the silk-screening process and helped fill tee shirt orders. The final project took place at a women’s hand weaving cooperative, a vestige of the Sandinista regime that dissolved into capitalism in the early 1990’s. Here I was taught to use a loom as well as the long process involved in preparing the thread for weaving. I made floor mats and a tablecloth, all of which were sold to keep the co-op going. In the last week of my stay, I also worked one day on house construction in a rural village.

I lived with a wonderful host family in a suburban neighborhood; they fed me three meals a day, took me to the beach and on other outings, and were extremely affectionate and accommodating. I went to a fabulous Latin American art museum, I spent a day in the country visiting farms and playing with animals, I went shopping at a craft market, I toured the cathedrals of the city, I took traditional Nicaraguan folkdance lessons, I climbed a volcano, and I had amazing conversations with every Nicaraguan I met. It was an incredibly rich and fulfilling experience, and relatively inexpensive (I

think) for the amount of time I was there. Because of the flexibility of the Peace and Justice Volunteer program, I would recommend it highly to any adventurous, self-sufficient Obie. Proficiency in Spanish is a prerequisite for the program. The Sister City Project also sends delegations of 15-20 students to León; in the past they have worked with Yale University, Quinnipiac University, and Fairfield University, all located in the New Haven, Connecticut area. However, if there were sufficient interest at Oberlin, it's possible that a delegation could be arranged for Winter Term.