

New Year's Revolution: A Change in Africa

- Molly Sweeney

What was your New Year's resolution? Usually by the end of January the resolution has lost all its spark, and 2012 starts to look no different than 2011. Last year, while ringing in 2011, I watched as Bombados and firecrackers swirled through the streets of Jinotega, Nicaragua. The sky lit up with homemade fireworks thrown from each corner. Although the fireworks were amazing, that's not what brought me to Nicaragua. I went to Jinotega to work as part of Outreach 360, a program dedicated to educating and caring for impoverished children. This February I again ventured down to Nicaragua to join the Outreach 360 volunteer team, this time bringing more supplies and donations than I did last year. Donating to Outreach 360 is an easy, direct, and gratifying way to begin the New Year.

Just by opening your desk drawers, you can make a difference. A donation doesn't have to be 50 dollars; it can be a pack of pencils, a box of chalk, or a soccer ball. The school that the Outreach 360 children aged four to thirteen is two cement rooms with a few scattered plastic chairs and a chalkboard. Though the building is a sad sight, the people are not; volunteers are greeted with bubbly little smiles and embracing big hugs. The students beam as they use the new pencils to write their names, over and over again. They squeal at the sight of the bubble they blew for the first time. When people have so little, even the simplest of gestures can change their lives for the better.

Although supplies are needed, money is also desperately needed. Donations go directly to the program and support the daily needs of the community. Money is obviously the most flexible donation, allowing the program to achieve immediate and long-term success. When the program first began, there was no sink in the whole school. Now volunteers have installed two sinks, which create a cleaner and healthier environment for the students and faculty. This financial donation made an immediate and positive contribution to the school's infrastructure. The eventual goal of Outreach 360 is to build a community center in town, which not only serves as a safe haven for the kids, but as a mentor program for them as well. This center will allow them to study and receive college scholarship opportunities, moving them out of poverty through education.

Poverty is the tie that both connects and cripples the people of Jinotega. Jinotega is the capital of coffee in Nicaragua. Each morning, men and women flock to the coffee fields to pick beans before the sun rises and remain at work until it sets. With no other choices, parents either lock their kids in the house or lock them out of the house. Kids inside are forced to watch out for each other and keep themselves entertained in their one-bedroom house for hours, while kids outside are exposed to continuous danger and bad influences. Thousands of miles away, millions of Americans are at Starbucks, sipping their steaming cafe latte, with beans picked by the parents of these abandoned kids. Those triple grande lattes are enjoyed in America only because of the sacrifices of the citizens of Jinotega. I have witnessed the hard work and poverty of the coffee pickers and I now have a better understanding of how the life we live relies on the deprivation of others.

Outreach 360 provides daily structure, education, and care for the kids of Jinotega. The program allows parents to go to work while their children can go to school and grow – as it should be. Next time you walk into Starbucks, think past your order and about the people that made it possible. You may be miles away from Jinotega, but your life is more interwoven with the lives of its citizens than you realize; a donation, whether it be money or markers, is a significant contribution.

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