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During the summer of 2009, I worked as an intern for the Foundation for Sustainable Development (FSD) in Masaya, Nicaragua. FSD, an American non-governmental organization (NGO), placed me with a Nicaraguan NGO named Alternativa. Though FSD organized my internship, my day-to-day work was done entirely with Alternativa.

To understand what my internship entailed, allow me to explain briefly the mission of Alternativa. Basically, Alternativa works with small businesses in the greater Masayan community, providing small loans, business training and consulting, and various resources for local business owners. The organization works in partnership with CETIPYME (a Masayan technical institute), the United Nations Industrial Development Organization, and the Latin American Studies Program (LASP). Because of these partnerships, and the expertise of Alternativa's Founder and General Manager, Leonardo Martinez, the organization has been very successful in helping small businesses and contributing to the sustainable development of the Masayan community.

When I arrived at Alternativa, the staff was very prepared for the arrival of a new intern. Alternativa has hosted over ten FSD interns in the past, each of whom has worked on one of their various long-term projects. Many of the projects were started by other FSD interns, so there is a strong sense of continuity within the organization. Within the first week, I began working under Claudia Caldera, an assistant to Leonardo Martinez, on a project that involved advising a conglomeration of twelve shoemaking workshops. The first phase of the project, which included getting new (more advanced) equipment for the workshops, offering business-training workshops on design and recordkeeping, and establishing international business contacts, was

well under way when I arrived. Only two major steps were remaining in the eleven-month phase and they became the focus of my work at Alternativa. I am proud to say that we successfully completed Phase 1 of the project, leaving the future of the project in a great condition.

The great thing about working with Alternativa was that although my project was designed by a past intern, I was able to exercise a good amount of creative freedom and personalization throughout the process. Part of FSD's mission is to utilize the personal strengths and interests of each intern, ensuring that the intern is able to feel empowered and useful. This was most definitely the case. Because I had experience working in retail sales, photo editing and graphic design, and billing and accountancy work, I was able to use my skills to help the shoemakers in ways that provided genuine results. Utilizing my prior experience allowed me to save Alternativa hundreds of dollars. Some of these savings are being used to purchase a new desktop computer for the office that the shoemakers will be able to come in and use at any time.

A large portion of my work at Alternativa was focused on designing and creating a catalogue for the shoemaking conglomerate. Initially, Alternativa had planned to hire a photographer and designer, which would have cost them hundreds of dollars. Because I had my own digital camera, some cheap photo-editing software, and the know-how to design a catalogue, I was able to volunteer to do the entire project for them. It was a great experience. I traveled to each of the workshops, taking photos of their products under proper lighting and backgrounds. I then took all of the photos and edited them to improve their appearance. I met with each workshop owner to select their favorite three photos for their page on the catalogue. Finally, I designed and created the template for the catalogue, which used a theme similar to the Nicaraguan national flag. The workshop owners loved the catalogue, and we were able to print forty copies on professional paper just in time for our Panama business trip.

The remainder of my time at Alternativa I spent reviewing the progress of each workshop, providing personal evaluations, and preparing a team for the Panama business trip. The owners were very responsive and cooperative. After all, Alternativa had provided them with all kinds of assistance and equipment. Preparing for the trip was exciting. We began by contacting a technical institute named Instituto Cooperativo Interamericano (ICI). ICI helped us decide where we would stay and which markets we would visit to find potential vendors. To prepare for the trip, I created an itinerary with Claudia, as well as regulatory guidelines for the travelers. I oversaw the election process by which the workshop owners chose two delegates to represent them in Panama. It was thrilling and empowering to be able to run weekly meetings with professionals. It tested my ability to use Spanish at a high level, as well as leadership and public speaking skills. By the last week of my internship, the group was awaiting the trip, catalogues in hand, and all the hard work and preparations that I had completed were ready to go. As a surprise, my boss, Leonardo Martinez, invited me to join the group on the Panama trip. It came as such a surprise. I was actually able to be a part of the trip that I had spent all summer preparing for. Needless to say, the trip was the greatest part of my internship. Not only did I get to travel to another country, all expenses paid, but I was able to use all of the skills and knowledge that I had gained during my internship.

All in all, I could not have been more pleased with my summer internship experience. I spent some of my last days in Nicaragua reflecting on my experience with another FSD intern, and we both agreed that our time in Nicaragua had been absolutely incredible. Unlike many interns who travel to Latin America, I never became sick from the food or water. I admit to feeling a bit homesick after about five weeks in country, but even those feelings eventually passed. There were a few times near the beginning of my internship that I struggled with the

language. Luckily, my coworkers and family were helpful and patient, allowing me to build confidence in myself. By the end of the summer, I found myself wanting to stay, wishing I could remain immersed in Spanish, and confident that I will return to Latin America someday. I believe that I was incredibly blessed to be placed with FSD and Alternativa in Masaya. Both organizations were very organized and provided positive atmospheres for personal growth. My experience in Nicaragua was nothing like I had expected it to be. It completely shattered all of my expectations.

Nicaragua, more than anything, provided an excellent launching pad for my final year at Notre Dame. Prior to my summer internship, I lacked confidence with the Spanish language, the notion of working abroad, and the general concept of starting a career after graduation. Today, I feel confident that I am ready to return to Latin America and hopefully begin a career working abroad. I leave you with a final thought that best captures my experience. It is an excerpt from the journal I kept while living in Nicaragua:

“Some believe the word *Nicaragua* literally means ‘surrounded by water.’ And in many ways, that’s how I felt when I arrived. It was like being placed on a ship in the middle of a vast ocean with no land in sight. Lost at sea, I was forced to pick a direction and push ahead, hoping to find land. After sailing for an entire summer, I never found even a mere island. To my surprise, it was not finding land that made me feel at home. I had fallen in love with the sea, with the feeling of being out of my element. Nicaragua didn’t teach me to find a new comfort zone, but to love the aimless sailing, being forever at sea.”