

La Salida del Sol

The Grupo Fenix Newsletter

February, 2009



Planting Seeds and Growing . . . a few words from Susan Kinne, Director

We are delighted to be sending a new edition of the Grupo Fenix newsletter. Our first item of news is that we have a new international education coordinator, Bruno Georges, who joined us at the beginning of January. Bruno is fluent in French, English and Spanish, has years of experience as a mechanical and software engineer, and has traveled all over the world. He has worked in Guatemala promoting a women's cooperative, and for years has been a prominent member of Artisans du Monde, which is a fair trade association in France selling fair trade products and educating and campaigning on behalf of fair trade businesses. He has a wealth of experience to bring to Grupo Fenix and our work with the Sabana Grande community and the Mujeres Solares, and we are excited to have him with us.



Bruno and Nimia celebrate their birthdays



Dave Smith

We are also delighted that David Smith, an electrical engineer from Guelph, Canada, started with us at the beginning of February as our Sabana Grande Research and Volunteer Coordinator. David brings a special mix of technical knowledge and people skills that makes him ideal for this position, one which we have needed for quite some time. We welcome both of these guys with open arms.

These past eight months have seen many changes at the Solar Center in Sabana Grande. We now have a gravity-powered concrete reservoir that captures rainwater from the roof of the Solar Center and delivers it to a 7,000-liter concrete holding tank, benefitting our fruit and nut trees and other plants during dry spells. We also have a beautiful iron gate fronting the center near the highway, lending both artistry and security to the Solar Center grounds. A new concrete ramp underlies the gate and connects the grounds to the highway to provide delivery trucks easy access to the center grounds. And the Solar Center windows are now adorned with intricately wrought iron grillwork, which is both beautiful and utilitarian. A new adobe casita, matching the main solar center building, now graces the center grounds and houses our solar water pump system. And we now have a wide patio on three sides of the Solar Center, increasing our level work space



dramatically. We even have a very sweet, home-made sign on the highway now. We owe practically all of these latest improvements to the Noble Foundation, whose support has been so crucial to our progress. The Body Shop's support has also been instrumental in our growth, the latest example of which is our rain-water collection and holding tank system.



Looking from inside the Solar Center through the new iron grill work on its windows

We hosted two solar culture courses, one last July and one we recently completed in mid-January; one mini-tour/course from a group of Fordham Law School students in the US; and a joint course with Solar Energy International in November. Whew! Some of the course participants share their stories in this issue of the Newsletter. And the Solar Women held a Solar Fair on the center grounds on December 17.

Last, but certainly not least, we have been working closely with personnel from the SEED Initiative to plan its year of support. The SEED award and the events surrounding it, and what it means for our partnership with the Solar Women of Totogalpa, are explained in our lead article.

Thank you to everyone who has graced us with their help in the past. It is only because we have had many hands and minds dedicated to sharing their ideas, experience and dreams for the betterment of rural communities in Nicaragua that we have come so far. We need all of you and *more* of you in our future to make our model solar community a self-sustaining reality!

Lighting Up Our Hopes – The SEED Initiative

by Katherine Ransel, International Volunteer

Grupo Fenix and The Solar Women of Totogalpa have been recognized for their accomplishments in the past, but this past August, our partnership received an outstanding international award that promises to move the Mujeres Solares of Totogalpa to a new level in their organizational development.

The SEED initiative is a partnership of the IUCN -- the International Union for Conservation of Nature -- and the United Nations' Commission on the Environment (UNEP) and its Commission on Development (UNDP). It recognizes projects for their excellence in presenting a model of sustainable development capable of repetition and inspiring others around the globe, SEED supports exceptional, entrepreneurial, nascent, multi-stakeholder partnerships for locally-led sustainable development.



The Solar Women and PFAE Staff at the SEED Award Ceremony

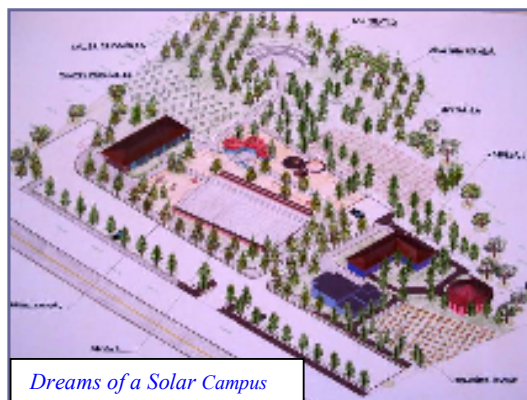
A friend suggested that Grupo Fenix's partnership with the

Solar Women of Totogalpa was the kind SEED was seeking world-wide to recognize and support, and so we made application last March for the 2008 awards. We were pleased when informed that we were among 15 finalists from around the world, if daunted by the tasks before us in competing for the final award.

For example, it was ironic that to compete as a finalist, we had to submit a business plan for the Solar Women because among the needs we had identified if chosen as a winning project was expert help in *creating* a business plan! But we carried on, answering in great detail all the questions posed to us about the environmental, economic and social impacts of our partnership; proposed measures of success; the specific needs we would address with SEED support; letters of recommendation; photos and brochures explaining our work; and, lo and behold, a draft business plan. We had only about three weeks to do all of this work, but on June 9, we sent off our package, never dreaming we would actually be chosen.

To our surprise and delight, in August, we received notice from Dr. Helen Marquardt, executive director of the SEED Initiative that the SEED International Jury had selected our partnership as a winner of the 2008 SEED Awards from over 400 applications world-wide. The award recognized our partnership's "innovation and entrepreneurship, the likely contribution to promote economic growth, social development and environmental management in Nicaragua, and not least[,] the potential of [the] partnership to inspire others."

SEED is supporting our partnership with the Solar Women of Totogalpa so we can progress to where the production and sale of solar panels, cookers, dryers, and dried fruit and medicinal and culinary herbs will enable the solar center to become self-sufficient, and eventually grow such that the businesses can support other community development projects in the community, as well as local, regional and national outreach and education efforts to bring this renewable energy development model to other communities. In this process, the Solar Women look to becoming an independent legal entity, handling their own administration, planning, marketing and sales.



To celebrate the award and attract public attention to our partnership, SEED's executive director, Dr. Marquardt, worked with us to organize an award ceremony at the UNI. She came from England to make the announcement and present the award, first visiting the Solar Women in Sabana Grande on October 21 and 22 to see first-hand how the solar center operates and to learn from the women themselves their dreams for the future.

On October 23, the formal SEED award ceremony was held at the UNI. The Solar Women traveled to Managua to receive not only the SEED award, but also an award from Eurocentro, a program of the Instituto Nicaraguense de Desarrollo, for overall excellence in developing renewable energy resources. This was the third year in a row that the Solar Center and the Solar Women have been honored by Eurocentro.

Among the speakers at the award ceremony was Lic. Sergio Martinez, Vice-Rector of the University. His closing remarks, which frame so perfectly our mission and the mission of the

SEED initiative, still echo in our hearts: “If we can do this in one community, just imagine the impact we could have if we replicated it in 1000 other communities,” he said.

That of course is our ultimate goal. In the meantime, we look forward to reaping the benefits of the SEED award on our way to realizing our vision for the future.

The benefits of the initiative include:

1. Increased exposure, globally and in-country:

SEED announced the 2008 Award Winners in mid-August of last year, raising attention and public recognition for our initiative and our partner organizations (e.g., Suni Solar, Skyheat, ETHOS, ADRA, and others). Moreover, our work will be showcased at international high-level events over the next year where the SEED Initiative is represented, such as it was for the IUCN World Congress in October. As a SEED Award Winner, we will gain access to SEED’s international partner network and its newly launched Associate Partners Network. In addition, SEED is activating in-country SEED Partners and seeking to leverage further support from other interested organizations.

2. Support services to strengthen our partnership:

The value of the SEED Award is \$25,000. This is made available in the form of training, field trips to other successful programs, technical assistance and access to experts in business and marketing plans; expertise to decide what organizational form is most conducive to the women’s plans for the future; training in administrative and technical skills necessary for the growth of their solar businesses; and planning for expansion of the facilities at the solar center. SEED is working with us to develop a flexible package of tailor-made support services. It will respond to the needs we identified in our application, and include capacity-building in many areas the Solar Women will need to become an independent organization. SEED also promises to help find opportunities for profiling our work and finding financial partners and sponsors.

3. Highlighting and replicating our success:

Because SEED has determined that our work has such great potential to inspire and to be replicated elsewhere, the *International Institute of Sustainable Development (IISD)*, which provides SEED’s Research and Learning Program, will contact us during the next year to discuss our activities, the lessons we learn and our experience being a SEED Winner. SEED and IISD will publish a report next year which will share our work and which will offer lessons to inspire others, and make recommendations to influence decision-makers. SEED also hopes to bring the 2008 Class of Award Winners together for an international Winners’ Workshop at the beginning of 2009.

The Solar Women have had several meetings with SEED to clarify and refine the ways in which SEED support during the coming year can best advance their dreams for a self-sustaining Solar Center that creates and supports opportunities for *restorative* (not just sustainable!) development in Totogalpa, Nicaragua, and beyond. A plan for the use of SEED resources will be reviewed by the Solar Women at the end of January. Stay tuned for further reports and developments on the SEED initiative!

If I Can Do This, You Can Too!

by Charlotte and Josh Olmstead

I'm a 57-year-old widow from Colorado Springs. My friends thought I was crazy when I told them I had signed up for a hands-on workshop in Nicaragua building solar cookers and installing solar panels. My 27 year-old-son, however, thought it sounded great. In fact, he thought it sounded so great that he wanted to come along. That was the beginning of a great adventure we shared this past November in Sabana Grande.

We arrived knowing very little about alternative energy, not speaking Spanish, but open to learning. And learn we did! Susan and Laurie put on an excellent workshop, a mix of classroom learning and hands-on applications. We were welcomed warmly into the community and were fortunate to

live with Marcos Antonio and Vidalia. Wilma, another volunteer who was living with Marcos and Vidalia, helped us immensely by translating. We quickly became used to the outhouses and cold outdoor showers and the chickens waking us early in the morning. I was impressed by how hard everyone worked, getting up at 4:30 a.m. to walk to the Molina (mill for corn), hauling water, and preparing delicious meals, from homemade tortillas to solar cookies.

We went on several early morning hikes which were especially wonderful, allowing us to see even more of this beautiful country. Another interesting thing was experiencing our presidential elections through their eyes, and in turn, seeing their election process. I think the best part for me, though, was getting to experience everything with my son. We still laugh about some of the funny experiences and remember the other volunteers who were so great, the going away party, our song, and all the rest. How wonderful to share an experience like this together. My son is now talking about looking into other volunteer opportunities. Thanks to the Solar Women, our host families, and especially Susan Kinne and Laurie Stone, for an amazing experience!



Charlotte and her son Josh are in the second row on the left in this snapshot of the SEI course in November.

Sun Days: Notes from My Solar Culture Course in Nicaragua

by Kevin Wilkinson--Massachusetts, USA, January, 2009

At a recent conference for sharing ideas about appropriate technologies for developing cultures, at Brown University, Rhode Island, USA, I chose a workshop called "Solar Cookers." I confess, it was not my preferred choice, but it fit well with the time I had available that afternoon. As things often go with me these days, that choice put me on an unpredictable path to the bucolic hills of Nicaragua where Grupo



Fenix teaches its Solar Culture Course. I owe much thanks to Eric and Virginio, who gave that workshop and, by their verve and exuberance for Grupo Fenix, pointed the way South for me.

I did some web checking and browsed in the travel section of our library, as well as some correspondence with Dr. Richard Komp and Susan Kinne, passionate advocates for renewable energy. The allure of a ramble to Nicaragua's highlands roused me into action. My next move would be all-important.

"Kathy, I'm thinking of taking a solar energy course."

"Hmm, interesting. When is it?"

"It's in January. It's about two weeks long."

"Sounds doable. Where?"

(Dramatic pause) "Well, It's in Nicaragua."

"NicaRAgua! I should have known it wouldn't be simple. Some husbands wake up and head out to the home center, to work, or for a walk. I married a man who wakes up and says he's headed to Nicaragua. I should know better by now. *Nothing new under the sun....*"

So after a few more talks, explanations and safety assurances, I heard my good wife say what she says before each of my voyages: "Be smart, be safe, come home."

As promised, Bruno and Luis were holding Grupo Fenix signs as I exited the airport in Managua. Their friendly demeanor and the feeling of being in the tropics again were delightful. On the ride to the barrio where I'd be staying, the *sabor* of the streets called up memories of Latino culture that I'd become so fond of on past trips to Latin America. Perhaps it's the potholes in the tired roads, or possibly--as I like to believe--it's the free spirit of the people that allows them to dismiss the streetlights and the lane markers. Either way, Managua is to Massachusetts as the Meringue is to the Hokey Pokey.



Kevin Gets Down and Dirty!

Before leaving Managua for the north country, the other course participants, the leaders, and I visited important city locations related to the renewable energy movement. At the Universidad Nacional de Ingenieria (UNI) we visited the Program de Fuentes Alternas de Energia (PFAE), and its director, Susan Kinne. While there we met UNI's dedicated staff who gave talks providing an historical backdrop to the work-study experience we were just beginning. Also, we walked from the university to an outdoor exhibit where we saw a bio-digester that used the methane gas produced from the latrines to power a cooking stove. Other latrine models showed how to construct composting toilets and the requisite leaching areas so that the end result produced organic garden fertilizer. Within moments I was seeing how this simple technology could be taken to other developing cultures with relative ease.

Once we'd finished our business in Managua, it was off in the microbus to the municipality of Totogalpa, and the community of Sabana Grande. By the end of our travel day to "Centro Solar," the place where the course is taught and where Grupo Fenix builds the solar cookers and panels, I was tired and a bit disoriented. I think the others in the group felt the same. Suddenly we had to

rely heavily on whatever Spanish we spoke, as very little English was spoken by our host families or the Centro Solar staff. In addition, to the language challenge--which I welcomed, as I yearned to improve my Spanish on this trip--there was the cultural difference that generally exists between Latino and Anglo groups. I've noted that Latino groups do not interact in a linear, one-at-a-time fashion, the way many Anglos are used to interacting. Latino groups have the ability to hold numerous conversations at the same time in the same space. The delight they have while story-telling, joking, laughing and arguing carries over into their learning/teaching style as well. Many Anglos are unnerved by this "cacophony." If travel demands anything, it demands the ability to adapt and adjust. For me, the adjustments came in waves, each wave delivering me from the self that I dragged with me from Massachusetts. "Nica" insisted herself upon me. That first night at my host family's casita, I tried to get some much-needed rest. I stared up through the mosquito net at the tennis shoes that were stuffed in the gaps by the rafters' ends. Burros, roosters, pigs and more moved about in the darkness outside, causing yet another exotic cacophony that first annoyed, then enthralled me. I dreamt of a bird called the Resplendent Quetzal, a Central American symbol of liberty.

The remainder of the trip included class time learning about photovoltaics, solar panel construction, and solar cookers. At times the theoretical lectures were fast-paced and too much for me to grasp; other times felt like they crawled along too slowly. In all, I got the introduction to PV that I was looking for. I like to say that now I know more about the questions to ask regarding PV. Later, when we helped install a system on a home beside Centro Solar, I felt the classes kick in and I had a pretty clear understanding of the what and why of it all

Las Mujeres de Totalgalpa are the real workers at Centro Solar! They are the gears of the machine (turned by the sun's energy, of course!). Much has been said in praise of the women of Totogalpa, but I'll add one more thing. After long days of teaching solar cooker construction, hand-holding, and trouble shooting, these amazing women somehow appear back at our family-stay places and prepare our dinners. I'll be forever grateful to them, especially to Frederlinda and her family. Like so many journeys around this world have taught me before, one's family can take on many different faces in many different places. With a keen eye, you can spot a family member in a far-off place so that you never feel really alone on the road.

To my Grupo Fenix family, my course family, my host family, the international volunteer family, and the Nica family, thank you and muchísimas gracias.

Upcoming Courses and University CIPPER Exchanges

Center for Environmental Living and Learning Course* - February 16 to March 17

Cornell University Solar Cooker/CIPPER Exchange* - March 14 - March 21

University of Dayton/CIPPER Exchange* - May - May 14

Solar Culture Course - July 6 - July 16 (open for registration)

UC Davis Solar CIPPER Exchange* - July 23 - August 3, 2009

****course is not open to the public***

Please visit our website at www.grupofenix.org, or email us at thegrupofenix@gmail.org for information about how you can contribute to our programs.