

**Breathing easier now that son has returned home****Wednesday, August 3, 2005**

By: JEAN GILLETTE - For the North County Times

He's home. For any of you who may have had the audacity to forget, my boy-child just returned from six weeks in a remote village in Nicaragua.

I never realized I could hold my breath for six weeks, but by darn, it appears I did. It feels exquisite to exhale, which I refused to do until I saw his lean, hairy face coming down the airport stairs.

He departed as a typical American 16-year-old, clean-shaven and fueled by high-fat junk food. Somewhere between changing flights in Miami or Managua, perhaps during one of the many flat tires on the bus rides to his village or possibly as he gazed at the stars in a sky untainted by streetlights, he lost 20 pounds, grew a sparse, strawberry-blond beard and gained the confidence and self-possession of a man of 25.

I am enormously pleased for him. I am not completely thrilled for me.

Where did my child go? I have spent the past six weeks learning the hard way that my babies are grown and can manage without me. It is a timely and important lesson, but I feel I got shortchanged just a hair. I wasn't supposed to have to make this adjustment for another full year. Empty-nest syndrome is sort of like taking a foul-tasting medicine. I know it's good for us both, but it makes me grimace and sigh a lot.

My wandering child has graciously answered our hundreds of questions and knows we have hundreds more coming. No, the mosquitoes weren't a problem for him, but he did use his net at night. The heat and humidity nearly killed him the first week, but then became quite bearable as he acclimated. The people were gracious and kind. In partnership with Save the Children, he helped build 17 stoves that provided his village with a fuel-efficient cooking source and chimneys for proper ventilation. He cleared fields to keep the snakes away from the homes.

He got a classic farmer's tan, as they never take off their shirts and always wear long pants. He bathed in a bucket with water from the well. He brought home a gorgeous, soft hammock, wood carvings and a T-shirt celebrating El Gallo Pinto. (Gallo pinto is the classic Nicaraguan dish of rice and beans that he ate daily.) He taught English and learned Spanish. Amigos de las Americas partnered him with two very capable, very fun-loving

young women from Houston and Denver, which was exactly as he hoped it would work out. They went through Alice's looking glass and pronounced it awesome.

"What was the worst thing about it all?" I asked him. He reluctantly admitted he suffered from what we delicately call the "inside sweats" the entire six weeks, including one severe bout with parasites his first week in country.

And the best thing? "Living in a completely different culture, speaking a completely different language and yet feeling like I belonged there," he replied thoughtfully.

His host family called him the day after he got home. At first I couldn't imagine why they would do that. Then it occurred to me that they were also now family. They miss him, too. It made me wish I knew them. It made me cry.

I read somewhere, and always agreed, that a child can never have too many people who love him. Buenas noches, mi hijo. And welcome back to your other home.

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