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Luisa Palacio-Cortez, the 83-year-old woman who lives in a two-room house next to Camp Red Horse, cooks beef for her family's evening meal. Beef is a rarity for her and her family. She said they mostly live on beans, rice, tortillas and sometimes one of the chickens that run around their property. (U.S. Air Force photo/Senior Airman Jacque Lickteig)

Commentary by Senior Airman Jacque Lickteig

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3/9/2007 - SANTA TERESA, Nicaragua (AFNEWS) -- When Luisa Palacio-Cortez invited me into her life, perspective slapped me in the face and threatened a lifelong imprint - one I will run my finger over in appreciation for years to come.

The 83-year-old Nica woman lives next to Camp Red Horse, in what I originally thought was a grey, brick and wooden barn.

I've seen her most afternoons sitting in a white, plastic lawn chair in the dirt-covered front yard as if she were keeping guard over the livestock that grazed nearby and the chickens that pecked for bits of grain at her feet.

Throughout many of our excursions in the surrounding towns to meet the locals and sporadic visits to the medical readiness training exercises, I've caught glimpses of the peoples' existence through my camera lens.

In those few photographs, I could only capture a fraction of what these peoples' lives are truly like. Through their tattered clothes, impoverished appearances and the sheer number of people who show up at the MEDRETEs, it is easy to see how a new school, a new medical clinic and opportunities for free health and veterinary care would help.

Back home, these kinds of gifts are a dime a dozen, easily overlooked and soon forgotten. So, what we're doing here and how much it will help didn't fully hit me.

During my first interaction with Mrs. Palacio-Cortez my first week here, I was equipped with my camera. I broke through the language barrier with exaggerated gestures to ask if she would be comfortable with me taking her photo. Sitting cross-legged in her teal skirt, the frizzy, grey-haired woman half smiled and swatted the air in response as if to tell me not to click the shutter.

A month later and over a few days during the past week, she finally let me cross the threshold of her always-open doorway to observe her daily activities and pry into her life's story.

The first day, I sat on a bench made out of a split tree trunk in the front yard, pen eagerly in hand, as she told me about her life with a slightly uncomfortable expression.

She said she's always called the outskirts of Santa Teresa her home. For the last 15 years, she's resided with her husband, Selmo Cortez, and two of her five sons; Santo, 54, and Julio, 34; in the 15-by-20 foot two-room house that her family built.

She welcomed me and my translator into it with arms stretched out from her 4-foot, 9-inch thin frame, a wide smile that spanned across her strong-featured face and showed the gaps in her teeth, and the exclamation, "Pobrecito!"

Pobrecito is Spanish for poor.

The front room is the living area, kitchen, storage room and sleeping area for her sons. Newspapers cover the wall that face the doorway. A few plastic lawn chairs are scattered around the dirt floor. To the left, sunlight peeps in through openings in wooden slats, which double as the ventilation system, over the kitchen. That sunlight and what came through the doorway offers the only form of illumination, as the house has no electricity.

Two handmade wooden tables, littered with plastic bowls, buckets and cooking utensils, account for the only other furnishings in the room. Sacks of flour lie stacked against the front wall underneath a strung-up line of clothes that contrast against the mud-caked bricks.

After I examined everything, she led me through a draped doorway to the back room where she and her husband sleep on rusted metal and wooden cots softened with piles of mismatched linens. She pointed to their storage furniture - boxes and a couple of small wooden tables stacked with piles of clothing. A flashlight is their only light source for the room. They use an outhouse in the backyard. They bathe by splashing pails of water on themselves in a shower outside that's enclosed with pieces of scrap wood

As a few of her interested grandchildren from next door crept into the house one by one, she led me back to the bench in the front yard where she continued to tell me about her life.

She said Santo and Julio are the sole financial providers for the household, bringing in anywhere from 200 to 500 cordobas - equal to \$11.11 to \$27.28 - a month finding unsteady jobs like cutting plantains, picking coffee beans or chopping sugar cane stalks. Her 83-year-old husband is ill, so he cannot work.

"He's waiting for Jesus to take him," she said in Spanish.

Mrs. Palacio-Cortez is the machine that keeps the household running.

She said every morning after waking at about 4 a.m., she makes coffee and tortillas for breakfast if they have the commodities. Most days, she spends the remainder of the morning reorganizing the easily disheveled house, washing laundry in a stone washbasin behind the house and hanging it to dry or doing other chores.

At around 11 a.m., she starts cooking, something I was able to witness.

She filled a bucket with water from the pump in the front yard, the only water source for the residence, and set it under the table inside. She grabbed dishes off of the ash-covered counter in the kitchen and scrubbed them over the bucket.

The counter spans the width of the room, and its top is made of stone. On the left-hand side, a hearth sinks into the stone and long blocks surround three of its edges. The entire creation came from one solid piece of rock that her family chiseled to make the stove.

She took two long, dry branches of wood she'd gathered from the side of the road earlier, lit the tips on fire and set them inside the hearth. She blew out the flame to leave glowing embers.

As smoke filled the room, she grabbed a pan, tossed a cup of rice and a cup of water into it and set it on top of the burning wood.

The sizzle that ensued a few minutes later sparked excitement in the room. Roosters, chickens and three-day old chicks that were perched peacefully in one corner of the room kicked up their feathers, scrambled and scurried across the floor. The commotion scared their scrawny black cat, Negro, into running out from under one table to the shadows of the other.

The rice swelled in the pan while she explained she starts cooking at around 11 a.m. for the evening meal, which is usually around 4 p.m. Their meals usually consist of just rice, beans and tortillas she rolls out on stone. Two or three times out of the week they'll incorporate chicken into their evening meals.

At about 30 cordobas for a chicken at the market, which is sometimes 15 percent of their monthly income, she said it is too costly for them to buy regularly. Most times, it's the chickens that run around the house that end up on their plates.

However, when she buys meat, they have to use it within a day. With no electricity and no refrigerator, they have no means of preserving it.

Even when they have the money to spare, getting meat and restocking their supply seems like too much of a hassle.

Mrs. Palacio-Cortez said she shops for meat and other necessities in Santa Teresa. She treks the almost three miles into town because they have no means of transportation except what they were born with. Then, she lugs whatever goods she's acquired over her shoulder or, in true Nicaraguan style, in a basket balanced on her head for the three-mile journey home.

To keep from overstaying our welcome, I thanked her and asked if I could come back to take photos of her cooking another day.

"If I have something to cook that day," she said apologetically.

Two days later, I returned at around 11 a.m. outfitted with my camera and some rice, beans and beef.

Mrs. Palacio-Cortez accepted the offer and started slicing and seasoning the meat with mustard, other spices and juice squeezed directly from an orange. She lit up the stove just as she had two days prior.

While she cooked, I inquired deeper into her feelings.

In the era she was born, education was not available so she had no formal learning. As decades passed, schooling became available, more structures went up and roads paved the way for cars. But neither technology nor wealth has pushed past her doorway.

Throughout that time, power has exchanged hands numerous times, but her life has mostly remained unchanged.

"Whoever is in power makes no difference," she said. "The only difference I have seen through my years is my lifestyle has gotten better because everything is closer, and it's easier to get the things we need."

Through everything she told me, she portrayed her life as one that exists purely to exist. When I asked what her hobbies were, she shrugged her shoulders and said she lives to clean, cook and enjoy the afternoon breeze sitting in her lawn chair in the front yard as chickens peck at her feet.

"I'm old, and I'm just living my life day to day," she said.

But there's something to be learned from her and others like her. She said she knows she doesn't have much, but she doesn't yearn for anything more.

She said she's happy with what she has. There were times when she was younger that she wished for more. But she soon realized wishing wasn't going to do much for her. So, she learned to be grateful for what she has.

Also, she and her family form a tight-knit community in which the success of one is shared by all and the hardships of one are shouldered by all.

"Pacífico," or peaceful, was her response when asked to sum up her life in one word.

When I left her house that afternoon smelling of wood-burned smoke, she offered thanks for everything we've done and are doing here. I told her she's given me the greatest gift and thanked her for reminding me what is really important and helping me find the path to a peaceful life.