

Public Safety officers bring advice, police motorcycle to Nicaragua

by Meredith Guinness, Assistant Director of Academic Marketing and Communications



Public Safety Officer Felipe Rodriguez lectures at a June conference for Nicaraguan law enforcement officers.

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The police station in Granada, Nicaragua, bears little resemblance to any you'd find in an American city. Officers routinely work 12- to 13-hour shifts, battling the stifling heat with just one window air conditioner. Of the 10 police radios available, only six work. There are just 10 pair of handcuffs for a population of about 110,000.

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"The cops eat the same food that they feed the prisoners," said Felipe Rodriguez, a Fairfield Public Safety officer who recently toured the facility. "So if there are a lot of prisoners, there's not much to go around. And we're not talking about a lavish meal. It's mostly rice and beans. But they only get about \$120 a month for salary. The police department feeds them while they work or they might not be able to afford a meal."

Rodriguez and his fellow DPS officer, Craig Ervin, joined a contingent of volunteers who traveled to Nicaragua in June to offer the national police classes on corruption and police ethics, advice on community leadership and domestic violence, and a new motorcycle to add to their fledgling fleet. Former Fairfield Police Chief David Peck asked the two officers to join the group, organized by Partners

International, an organization that aims to bring hope to the "hard places" of the world. Ervin had worked on the Fairfield force and knew Peck. Rodriguez, who is also an adjunct professor in criminal justice at John Jay College and speaks fluent Spanish, was a perfect choice for the trip. Both officers paid their way and used vacation time for the week they were in Nicaragua.

"When we talk about the model of men and women for others, this hits it right on the head," said DPS Associate Director Frank Ficko. "And you think of students or faculty doing service. It's unusual for public safety officers to have the opportunity to do something like this."

Both officers participated in a conference for local police commissioners, sub-commissioners, and members of what's known as the tourist police. With corruption and organized crime an issue in the area, Ervin and Rodriguez offered realistic ideas for combating crime given the police department's resources.

In many ways the deck is stacked against them, Ervin said. Officers estimate up to half of the crime in Granada goes unreported and some shops take matters into their own hands, hiring armed guards to stand by the front door. The poverty is staggering, he said.

"It was a very eye-opening experience," said Ervin. "I don't know how they get the job done. They're very dedicated."

Rodriguez befriended tourist Lieutenant Amaru Alfaro, who lost his partner in a gunfight a few months ago. Rodriguez could relate: Two days before the trip, he attended the funeral of his former partner of 23 years on the New York City force. He died of heart failure, and Rodriguez blames the stress of being a police officer. Alfaro said his family now worries about his safety, especially since the department has no bulletproof vests for patrol. "I told him I'll get him one," Rodriguez said. "And I will. I'll get it to him if I have to take it out of my own pocket. That's something I have to do."

Rodriguez was so moved by the conditions, he even left a brand new pair of shoes with an officer who needed some. "It's just the right thing to do."

Both officers hope to return to Nicaragua next year. They're also looking for ways to collect funds and supplies they can send to the departments in Granada and Leon, another city they visited. "I think there's a lot we can do there," said Ervin.

For more information on Rodriguez and Ervin's efforts, contact them at frrodriguez@fairfield.edu, 917-560-0347 or cervin@fairfield.edu.

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The American contingent presents the Nicaraguan officers with a new police motorcycle.

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A typical holding cell at a Nicaraguan police department.

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