

Dr. Rosa Elena Bello

Rosa Elena was born in 1961 on the Pacific coast of Nicaragua into a farm family (*campesinos*) to a mother with a fifth-grade education and father who was illiterate. Her high-school education was interrupted by the harassment of the infamous Somoza National Guard. The martyr-priest Gaspar Garcia Laviana was her first mentor: at the age of seventeen she was visiting rural villages with him, singing at celebrations and delivering medicines. At the time of the revolution, she went on to work in the highly regarded national literacy campaign and there had her consciousness further raised about the urgent social needs and rights of the rural poor. In those isolated regions where there were no doctors, she was often called upon to practice medicine with only a nurse's aide degree. At the age of 23 she went into the women's rights organization AMNLAE and soon led the regional group; she then became part of the Community Movement in the town of San Juan del Sur, the scene of her operations since.

After she received her distance-learning high-school diploma and her nursing degree, Dr. Bello went from degree to degree—from general medicine with a specialty in natural/herbal medicine to a Master's in public health. She did this the way Nicaraguans often do when they have to work full-time and have children and live far from the universities in the capital: by traveling to Managua for Friday, Saturday and Sunday for seven years—a two and a half hour bus trip each way—to start early morning classes. She did this to expand her ability to work in public health education, focusing on caring for children and providing medical attention and family planning information to the most disadvantaged women.

in 1990 Dr. Bello started a community medical clinic and pharmacy to respond to the budget cuts of the new neoliberal government. She did this with the goal of delivering healthy babies, along with a Belgian doctor who spent ten years in San Juan. Community Medical Services, their base of operations, is self-sustaining. It began with programs to feed malnourished babies, encourage family planning, give prenatal workshops to high-risk women, and promote sanitation. What they found after five years of doing this was that most indices of health were not improving. After doing a survey asking women about their educational level and their family's health problems, they attributed this to a 70% illiteracy rate in the rural population. Dr. Bello's expansion of her interests in education, and her linkages between education and health, began at this point. Women were the highest percentage of illiterates. In 1998, in order to ameliorate these conditions, Community Medical Services began a literacy campaign among women in the rural areas-- specifically geared to health-related and gender content. 246 women were given the equivalent of a primary school education and earned a sixth-grade diploma in three years (qualifying them to attend high school). Dr. Bello organized another successful program in eleven villages on the island of Ometepe.

At that point, another survey revealed that many students wanted a high-school education but were unable to attend. The regular high schools exclude students who are over eighteen, pregnant, or mothers, or, ipso facto, if they work during the week. In 2002, Dr. Bello invented a structure that could serve such people: she opened a Saturday high school in town, with satellite schools in nine villages strategically located around the 250-square mile area of the municipality. In 2011 it has 356 graduates. It enrolls between 550 and 600 students a year.

Because of her interest in job creation, she also opened a Technical High School that gives a high-level technical degree in Accounting, Tourism, and Civil Construction. With a curriculum focused on citizenship education, the Free High School requires all seniors to teach literacy and write monographs on social conditions. Many of the Free High School's students have gone into public service (the Cabinet of Citizen Power, the mayor's office, the Ministry of Education). Some have taught and continue to teach in the Free High School. The levels of education and capabilities have been raised across the entire region, with incalculable benefits to personal life

and civil society.

Just as Dr. Bello had an encompassing vision of "health" that included education, she had an encompassing vision of public health that included violence prevention and the rescue of battered and abused women. In August 2010, she opened a shelter, Solidarity House, which offers bed and board, medical and legal assistance, and therapy. Dr. Bello's initiative comes as part of a citywide movement she has led (as the co-chair of the Commission on Childhood, Adolescence and Youth) to improve the lives of women and girls subject to violence, commercial sexual exploitation, and sex trafficking. Even in the short year it has been open, Solidarity House has rescued a few women who have graduated to living safely on their own. It provides psychological help to many as outpatients, and currently lodges five girls ages 13 to 15 who were sexually exploited or abused. The leaders of Solidarity House aim to develop their shelter as a national model for comprehensive community-based women's shelters.

Dr. Bello is also the regional head of the government's new grass-roots organization, the Cabinet of Citizen Power. Volunteers from Europe and North America attracted by the vision have come for decades, in medicine, computer teaching, teaching English, and now, working in Solidarity House. (See "Volunteer Opportunities" on the website of San Juan's sister city, Newton, Massachusetts, at www.Newtonsanjuan.org.)

Dr. Bello has focused her programs in the greater San Juan area, which is 250 square miles comprising 33 villages, many hard to reach without mules or horses, and which contains 18,000 people. There she has progressed by adding programs as soon as she was able to, and integrating her programs in health, education, family planning, gender, and anti-violence to address a wide spectrum of related problems.

This bio was written by Margaret Morganroth Gullette, one of the hosts of Bello's residency. Gullette is a Resident Scholar at the Women's Studies Research Center, Brandeis University.