

NEWS RELEASE

Wilfrid Laurier University



Contacts: Julia Ann Easley
WLU Information Officer
(519) 884-1970 ext. 2070
(519) 742-2886

Angela Petten/Danielle Bellefleur
(519) 747-9449

Nov. 30, 1990
063a-1990

Laurier students and professor to deliver school bus to Nicaragua

Angela Petten will probably be more anxious than most university students to finish writing her last exam this term: waiting for her outside the Athletic Complex at Wilfrid Laurier University will be a school bus idling its engine....

On December 19, the anthropology and sociology student will be the last of eight women from the Waterloo campus to settle in among its crowded cargo of medical supplies, clothing, textbooks, and computer equipment. And together, they will begin a journey of more than 7,000 kilometres to Nicaragua.

Under the umbrella of Trucks for Nicaragua, the group will deliver the bus and supplies to a farming co-operative, day-care centre, women's centre, and orphanages located in and around Estelie, a village about 125 kilometres north of Managua. Later, they will take textbooks to a university in the capital.

It will be the seventh vehicle to be delivered since the Toronto organization was established two years ago to assist in the rebuilding of the country, torn by war for eight years. Formed by people who have travelled and worked in Nicaragua, the organization has as its goal to acquire, deliver, and donate trucks to various rural economic development projects.

The Laurier group began to take shape when Dr. Susan Heald, a professor of sociology and anthropology, invited students who will be taking a new course on women in developing countries in January to join her in the project. It has since broadened to include others.

In addition to Petten, the other students are: Danielle Bellefleur, Bramalea; Claudia Filici, Rexdale; Skye Gordon, Kagawong; Kim Jones, Oshawa; Hanna Marcus, an exchange student from Germany; and Lynn Smith, Chatham.

"We get to help people and we get to have this great travelling experience," Bellefleur, a second-year student in biology and sociology, said in a recent interview.

"To travel with seven other women and get to know them," said Petten of New Hamburg, "...I think it's going to be an incredible experience."

Even before they leave, the women have begun fulfilling their obligations to those they've undertaken to assist. "We're in so deep now, they'll have to break out in war to keep us from going," said Petten.

Responsible for their own fuel and accommodations on the 11-day trip to Nicaragua and for their return flight from Costa Rica in mid January, the group members have been active raising money through bake sales and concerts.

They've solicited donations of money and supplies: larger items include a computer provided by the National Action Committee on the Status of Women, a gynecological table and lamp, and wheelchairs.

"What we're doing is quite political," said Petten. "The people who believe in what we're doing are quite supportive. Nicaragua is pretty volatile right now. One of the reasons Nicaragua needs our help so badly is the United States has not come through on its promise of aid."

Based on suggestions from Canadians living and working in Nicaragua and in consultation with the Toronto organization, the women themselves decided what projects they would assist. They aimed for projects that would help women and children, and promote education.

"The important thing is that we're doing it ourselves," said Bellefleur, noting that the group will know the supplies are reaching the hands of those who need them.

What they can't do is guarantee their families that nothing unfortunate will happen during their travel (through the United States, Mexico, Guatemala and the Honduras) and the week they spend in Nicaragua delivering the goods and living in the Sandinistan village. Petten talked of diseases, border crossings, and the strife in that area of the world.

"Some families are really freaked," said Petten. "They want us to go and they don't want us to go. They know it's going to be such an experience...."

Petten admitted that she herself has mixed feelings about the adventure. "But life is risky. I'm very interested in other parts of the world. If that involves a modest risk, that's what I'll do."

To mitigate potential problems, the group has taken advice from others: don't travel at night; don't wear jewelry or makeup; wear loose-fitting, modest clothes with hair tied back; don't stay alone in a bedroom; and move about only as a group.

While there is some concern that the group may be more vulnerable because its members are all women, Petten said, collectively, they have a number of things working in their favor.

Bellefleur, who has travelled alone in Africa, has experience in negotiating borders. Filici, a native of Argentina, is fluent in Spanish. And Heald did a year of undergraduate study in Columbia.

Petten said their diversity of experiences and views will also add to the richness of the trip -- especially as they spend about 11 days over 7,000 kilometres cramped in a 20-seat bus. "We're not all the same politically. We have some people who are all for the GST (Goods and Services Tax).

"That's probably one of the best things about our group. We can laugh at each other. It adds a lot of excitement. That's far more exciting than if the group had been clones."