



# Mary's Pence News

Fall 2009 Edition

## ESPERA Funds - The Initial Year

At Mary's Pence we know that in order to be successful any lending program has to include values that support women. The values that guide Mary's Pence include collaboration, fostering learning and empowerment. We focus on projects that build the common good, support women with training and technical support and measure success by the program's affect on families and communities rather than by profit or repayment rates.

From this experience we developed ESPERA Funds. ESPERA means "she hopes" in Spanish and stands for *Economic Systems Promoting Equitable Resources for All*. The ESPERA Fund community-lending program supports the values of Mary's Pence, and is a one-time grant to a community.

ESPERA self-renewing funds, administered by networks of women's groups, are used to finance income-generating projects that promote the common good and enable local women to support community-based solutions. This new initiative is based on an effective "peer-lending" model created by former board member Gilda Larios in rural Mexico.

*Concertacion de Mujeres de Suchitoto* in El Salvador was one of our first ESPERA Fund partners. Beginning last year with visits from our grants advisor, community members selected a project coordinator and agreed on criteria for women to receive funds. They also established replenishment terms, and a plan to provide business and financial training.

We have learned much from this dedicated group of women. The women have started a number of businesses that are sustained by the local economy. They are learning

how to manage their ESPERA Fund in a way that works best in their community. Early on they realized that a coordinator would help them stay focused and keep good records. But how would they pay for the services of this coordinator? Since fund participants determine the interest rate to charge, the group decided to use part of the interest to fund the coordinator position. In addition, Mary's Pence helped to fund their coordinator for the initial year before interest was paid.



Nine months into the program the women are well on their way. Women have borrowed money and invested in shops, in a bakery, and in agriculture projects. Some of the new businesses even have plans to expand. For many women this is the first time that they have money of their own.

The women are learning the value of saving their earnings. The idea of saving for the future is something new.

Access to resources fundamentally changes women's position in their families and communities – they can rely on their own resources and make decisions that benefit their families and their children. If a woman has adequate income her children have access to health care and education.

At Mary's Pence we are committed to this vision. Using what we have learned in this initial year, we continue to create additional ESPERA Funds for community lending. Our strategy provides opportunities to women in the poorest regions of the Americas. As a grassroots donor community we can only do this with your support. Your contribution will help us to fund women-led ESPERA Funds in new communities.

# The Power of Networks

The story of Mary's Pence in Nicaragua, and the formation of *Red de Mujeres Nicarabault*, is a beautiful story. Mary's Pence had been giving to women in Nicaragua for years. Kitty Madden, a member of the board and a leader of Casa Materna, a grantee in Matagalpa, Nicaragua, saw that there were many talented and dedicated women in Nicaragua who were connected through Mary's Pence but did not know each other.

So Kitty organized a gathering; seven groups were present, and *Red de Mujeres Nicarabault* was born. The network has grown to a collaborative of 13 women's groups across western Nicaragua, and they have new groups seeking membership in the network. The women of the network meet annually to make connections, share experiences and develop skills. This group received ESPERA Funds, and this spring it gave its first loans.

*Red de Mujeres Nicarabault* elected coordinators from within the groups, and a powerful team was formed.

Reyna Moreno Lazo is an outgoing, get-things-done type that likes to challenge the status quo; walk down the street with Reyna and she will introduce you to half the community.

Maritza Aura Andino is a savvy organizer and business person. She's one of the founders of the Ojoche project which won a prize in Nicaragua for entrepreneurs (see article this issue).

Zoraida Sosa has long been active in the community and has a passion for combating violence against women; she's the mother-earth type, recognizing and nurturing the creativity and value of each woman in the network.

This is the team that is supporting the work of the 13 groups involved in the network. Mary's Pence supported the formation of this dynamic team and is making their energy and expertise available to women's groups in Nicaragua.

To read more about the role of networks in social change read an article by Margaret Wheatley at <http://www.margaretwheatley.com/articles/urgence.html>.



*Kitty Madden and Reyna Moreno*



*The three coordinators of the Nicarabault Network in Nicaragua. (L to R) Reyna Moreno, Maritza Andino, and Zoraida Sosa.*

# Voices from the Field:

## Hear from the Women Themselves

### *Nicaragua and El Salvador Videos Online*

In our first video presentations of grantee groups you can see and hear the women tell their stories. One video features *Concertación de Mujeres de Suchitoto*, our first fully funded ESPERA Fund; they received funds in the fall of 2008. The second video features *Red de Mujeres Nicarabault*, a network of women's groups that have received economic development grants and has recently received ESPERA Funds.

The videos were created by Kelly Creedon, an independent documentary photographer and multimedia producer based in Boston, Massachusetts. From 2000 to 2005, Kelly lived in El Salvador where she worked with various youth, education, and community media projects. In partnership with the *Asociación para el Desarrollo Económico Social "Santa Marta"* (ADES), she received a Mary's Pence grant to help young adults in the rural community of Santa Marta, El Salvador, access a high school-level education.

In March of 2009, Kelly returned to El Salvador to document the country's historic presidential elections. While in the region, she had the opportunity to visit some of the cooperative women's



projects that are working with Mary's Pence ESPERA Funds in both El Salvador and Nicaragua. "I was impressed and inspired by the level of hope and empowerment that I could see among the groups of women I met," Kelly remembers. "I was moved by the ways in which these funds are bringing women together to support each other and create the possibility for profound changes in their own lives as well as in their families and communities."

For more information on Kelly's current work, please visit her website: [www.kellycreedon.com](http://www.kellycreedon.com). Contact our office if you would like to receive a copy of the DVD in the mail.



### *Seventeen Women Speak*

In June Katherine Wojtan, Executive Director of Mary's Pence, gathered women's stories and perspectives. You can hear 17 stories in clips of five minutes or less on our website. Topics include violence against women, effective granting, civil war in Guatemala, formation of *Red de Mujeres Nicarabault*, and many more. Visit <http://www.maryspence.org/videos.html>

### **Mary's Pence in a Nutshell**

- #1: We fund women because when women earn money they use it to improve their lives, the lives of their families and their communities.
  - #2: We invest locally - ensuring issues are addressed with solutions that work in the region.
  - #3: We create sustainable change - providing access to resources, education or structures.
- ... SUCH AS LENDING POOLS.**
- #4: We strengthen connections so women can support and learn from one another.
  - #5: We give because our faith calls us to this work.

# Funding for Sustainable Change

The concept of placing decisions in the hands of women is fundamental to how Mary's Pence supports women, and fundamental to the ESPERA model. In recent travels in Nicaragua, Katherine Wojtan and Gilda Larios, staff of Mary's Pence, got to see a wide variety of projects in the area. ***The most successful projects have roots in the local community or culture; they are projects that meet a local need.***

When the seeds for a project come from outside Nicaragua the projects struggle. For example, outside groups donate pedal sewing machines for clothing coops which struggle to compete against donated and used clothing outlets; outside groups teach massage as a business venture in remote communities where touching in this way isn't part of the culture and people can't afford this luxury; or groups are encouraged to create decorative items which have little or no local market.

Projects with origins in the community and based on community needs thrive. One of the best examples is the Ojoche project. Ojoche is a tree native to Nicaragua and it has a seed that contains protein, calcium, iron and vitamin C in large quantities; it helps prevent and correct osteoporosis and arthritis, making it a good food for the elderly and sick, and is a good remedy for insomnia and anxiety. Mayan ancestors used this seed as the foundation of their diet and for medicinal uses.

A local group wanted to preserve the tree in the region and supply people with healthy food. This project pays local people to collect the seeds, and a



local bakery was formed to make bread and cookies from the Ojoche flour. The bakery employs seven people, and 262 rural women collect and process the seed.

Similarly, ceramics projects of Naranja and Rio Abajo have local roots. Clay for making the ceramics comes from the nearby river, and women make pottery much as their grandparents did; it's a local process, from local materials, with a local market.

Another promising project in the area is production of animal feed. The vast majority of women make ends meet by farming small plots of land and raising a small number of animals. A local need exists. The group that produces this product is hoping to become a member of *Red de Mujeres Nicarabault* and receive a loan. Currently their product is more nutritious but more expensive



than mass-produced feed. Perhaps joining the network will help this group market its product.

Another exciting project is an internet café. Maria Socorro Chevez Mungia and Alejandra Alejandra Lisette Argeñal Hernaíndez received a grant through Mary's Pence to buy computers and start an internet café. At this point their community doesn't have internet access so in anticipation they teach children how to use computer software.



In December the community will gain internet access and the women hope to provide it to their community. Even though internet access isn't a reality yet this was an empowering experience for these young energetic women.



ESPERA Funds are designed so decisions are made by local women, creating local solutions.

To read more on effective development read *The White Man's Burden* by William Easterly at <http://www.nytimes.com/2006/03/19/books/review/19postrel.html>.



The fruits of Mary's Pence funding (clockwise from top): Using local clay and techniques handed down for generations, ceramists are creating crafts for a local market; young women are dreaming of a brighter future by starting an internet cafe; Ojoche seed provides healthy diets as well as jobs in local communities; owning their own businesses means many women have money for the first time; ESPERA Funds offer assistance in budgeting and other skills vital to successful businesses; a successful projects raising chickens means eggs are also a plentiful part of local diets; many women are able to open or expand small stores.

## Board and Staff

**Rosa Castillo**  
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**Katherine Wojtan**  
*Executive Director*

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**Mary's Pence is a grassroots community that promotes Catholic social change by directing donated resources to small women's projects in the Americas.**

The Mary's Pence newsletter is published twice a year.

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**Mary's Pence will soon have a new logo and colors. Look for these changes in your Advent mailing.**

# Micro-Lending:

## Not Always the Answer

Organizations like Oxfam and Grameen Foundation have made funds available to the world's poorest individuals in a way never envisioned before.

In the case of Oxfam, loans are savings-led, requiring no external capital. Each member contributes a small amount. Members of the group take loans with a set rate, repaying and distributing funds at the end of the loan cycle.

But problems have emerged as well. In some cases local banks have tried to benefit from the micro-lending trend by charging exorbitant interest rates – up to 180% annually. This practice is not readily disclosed to the public.

Using Internet sites, North Americans are able to loan money to specific individuals and their projects. Interest received from the loan is paid to the micro-investor. However, the actual interest rate paid by the borrower is not disclosed and is significantly higher. In addition, too often these small businesses rely on exports to richer countries thereby making them dependant on the strength of another country's economy.

Katherine Duggar from the Harvard Business School, speaking at the Grantmakers without Borders annual conference, highlighted the main concerns in the rapidly growing micro-finance industry.

First, rural areas where there are significant poor populations are not easily served with micro-lending. Conversely, in urban slums people are mobile and there are few regulations, so lenders may come and go. In addition, when there is a low payment rate or many borrowers in arrears, collectors take collateral, require forced savings or chattel property.

Given the occurrence of these negative scenarios many poor people decide not to take the risk of borrowing, thus missing an opportunity to move themselves and their families out of extreme poverty.

Without significant reform micro-finance may miss the mark in helping the world's poorest. Key reforms include: monitoring bank lending practices with protection for clients; regulating interest rate ranges and how money is collected; creating incentives for lenders to monitor one another; offering programs in rural areas where lenders are not currently present; and, finally, keeping the focus on businesses which are diverse and local to strengthen the local economy.

## Micro-Lending:

### The Good, The Bad and The Ugly

The concept is great: Give women access to funds and let them use their creativity and energy to create businesses to support their families. And micro-lending has been successful. Funds are now available in many parts of the world which didn't previously have access.

But like every good thing, it can be taken too far or manipulated:

- Family members force women to access funds and then use them for other purposes.
- Banks get into the micro-lending business and make a profit off the backs of the poor.
- Lenders often charge very high interest rates.
- Organizations give loans far and wide and then outsource the collection of debts... and have little control of collection methods.
- In regions where there are many sources of loans, women sometimes get a succession of loans to pay off previous balances.

### *Mary's Pence ESPERA Funds are different.*

- Networks of women are granted a pool of money... it's theirs.
- The women manage the funds, so decisions, including interest rates and collection methods, are in the hands of the community.
- Giving to a network of women promotes working together. Many of the loans given by ESPERA Fund grantees are for collaborative projects.

# Harvesting the Seeds: The Effect of our Grantmaking

At a prayer meeting in Chicago nearly 25 years ago it was Sheila Murphy who the Spirit inspired to suggest that a women's collection be started and it be called "Mary's Pence." She went on to serve as a member of the founding board, and since then she has been a faithful supporter of Mary's Pence.

During our Donor's Reception at CTA last year, Sheila was present and shared a story about how Mary's Pence has had a profound impact on her family. Here is an excerpt:

*Back in the 1980s, Mary's Pence awarded a study grant to Barbara Blaine to attend De Paul University Law School. At the time, Barbara lived and worked at the Catholic Worker house in Chicago and ministered to poor women and children and protected them from the violence surrounding them. Years later, Barbara founded SNAP, an organization to assist adults who were child victims of sexual abuse by priests.*

*As the years passed, Barbara Blaine had occasion to assist several of my brothers who had been sexually abused as children by Father Leonard Abercrombie.... Our youngest brother, Eddie, self medicated with alcohol because of this sexual abuse. Barbara, by then an outstanding lawyer, helped him realize that his pain could be helped by speaking to others.*

*Eddie addressed the SNAP conference in 2007 in Washington, D.C. He was accompanied by his wife, Roe Brizzolara, my husband and myself. Imagine the pride that we all felt as Eddie addressed other survivors and later led a meeting for recovering alcoholics. Eddie related that his recovery was helped by realizing that keeping his sexual abuse secret kept him sick.*

*What made him well was helping others, attending Twelve Step Program meetings, and hiking in the mountains that he loved high above Colorado Springs. On May 23, 2008 Eddie saw dawn from the summit, but later slipped and fell to his death doing what he loved best— sober and free. Thank you, Mary's Pence for giving Barbara Blaine the encouragement she needed to become a lawyer by affording her a study grant.*

## Donor Reception at CTA

Midwest Airlines Center

Milwaukee, Wisconsin

Saturday, November 7, 2009

12:15 p.m.-1:00 p.m.

RSVP to [nicole@maryspence.org](mailto:nicole@maryspence.org)

or call 718-720-8040

*Please join Mary's Pence staff and board at 7:45 a.m. on Saturday as we lead morning prayer in solidarity with women in the Americas.*

## Growing Through Gatherings

People who give to Mary's Pence are very loyal. Many have been giving since the beginning. People who care so much make the perfect advocates to spread the word.

We are inviting all of Mary's Pence supporters to spread the word, and we know you will have fun doing it. We are asking you to host a **Mary's Pence Gathering** - to invite friends or family and share a video on Mary's Pence.

We'll supply the materials, from invitations to discussion questions, while you supply the connections to people who share your values. Contact us for materials and support.

***Increasing overall donations makes your dollars go farther.... We can do a lot more giving without increasing overhead.***

# Mary's Pence News

## *Ojoche Project Wins Award in Nicaragua*

A Mary's Pence grantee and participant in the Nicaragua Network won first place in a national competition for new entrepreneurs. El Buen Pan Bakery uses the Ojoche seed to make nutritious baked goods. They were among 180 competitors. For more on the Ojoche project see Funding for Sustainable Change in this issue. Congratulations!



## *Ministry Grant Application Information*

Mary's Pence ministry grants are given for projects or study. New criteria are posted on our website. Application deadlines are the first of the month in July, October and February.

## *Sign Up for E-Newsletter*

At the start of the year we will be offering our newsletter via email. If you would like to receive the newsletter by email let us know by sending us your email address.

## *Staying Connected - Study Grantees*

Recipients of Mary's Pence study grants are like seeds we've flung across the region. We'd love to reconnect with study grantees and hear about the work that has taken root. If you are a study grantee or know of one please send us contact information and we'll get in touch.

# Givers Highlights

## *How Else Can You Support Mary's Pence?*

Contact us and let us know how you would like to help.

**Donate a needed item.** Current needs include a Flip Video Camera and a projector.

**Donate a skill.** Current needs include web design, social networking, writing of blogs, grants and outreach materials, and design and layout of materials.

**Share your connections.** Help us do outreach in your faith community, Catholic College Alumni Association, or among your friends and acquaintances.

## *Compañeras*

Compañera means friend in Spanish, and our compañeras are clearly friends of Mary's Pence. Compañeras are individuals who give multiple times and receive one thank you at the end of the year. This consistent giving provides us with a great base of support to count on. If you are interested in joining this group of compassionate people please let us know. We'll send you a Women's Calendar to support your 2010 giving.

## *Faith Communities Support Mary's Pence*

If your community has a giving tree during the Christmas season, please ask them to include Mary's Pence as an option. Also, consider a Lenten Soup Supper as a way to tell the stories of the women of Mary's Pence. Contact us and we'll provide you with materials.

## *Planned Giving*

Leave a legacy that changes the world. Consider leaving a bequest to support the work of Mary's Pence. Contact Katherine Wojtan for additional information.

## Thank You, Sister

Mary's Pence was founded in collaboration with women religious; the majority of our founding board was Sisters. They have continued to contribute to Mary's Pence in many ways. And we gratefully acknowledge the work they have done to make this a just world.

Last January, the Vatican launched an **apostolic visitation** of institutes of women religious in the United States. Headed by Mother Mary Clare Millea, superior general of the Apostles of the Sacred Heart of Jesus, this study is meant to examine the **"quality of life"** of communities of women religious and look into ways in which women religious **"contribute to the welfare of the church and society."**

Now is the time for those of us who have been served by or served with women religious to **stand in support** and **express our gratitude** for these women who have given us so much.

All are invited to write letters in support of women religious which will be posted at [www.thankyousister.com](http://www.thankyousister.com) and sent to Mother Mary Clare Millea, Cardinal Franc Rode, Cardinal Francis George and Pope Benedict XVI as well as leadership teams of communities of women religious in the US. In these letters, you are invited to **share personal stories** about how women religious have impacted your "quality of life," **express** messages of **gratitude** and/or convey general messages of **support**.