

# The Ottawa Citizen

## 'I'm changed right to my roots'; Slums of Nicaragua give new meaning to what poverty is

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Illustrations: Photo: Courtesy Aboriginal Youth Empowering Students / Danielle Ogen, a native Canadian, says working amongst the poor in Nicaragua has given her a 'pride in my culture that I didn't have before.'

Five young Canadians who, a few weeks ago, thought of themselves as poor and facing limited futures, returned from the slums of Nicaragua last week with fire in their bellies and a new pride in themselves.

Part of a school-building project, they met people who survive as dump pickers and live in that contaminated environment, often dying from eating rotten food.

They met children who can't go to school unless they own their own pencil and notebook, and can't afford them.

First Nations people, the Canadians were changed to their cores.

They are members of Aboriginal Youth Empowering Students. They call themselves AYES, and pronounce it the way that signifies winners of a vote, as in: The AYES have it. The organization, still small, is a spin-off of the grassroots operation called SchoolBOX, with its brain in Almonte and heart in Central America.

It was founded by Tom Affleck, 30, of Almonte, who was exposed to the poorest of the poor while working with the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA) in Nicaragua in 2007. He now devotes himself full-time to SchoolBOX and has his community behind him.

His active volunteers include Almonte resident Leonard Lee, inventor, philanthropist, and founder of Lee Valley Tools.

One of those AYES volunteers is Danielle Ogen, 23, of Wet'suwet'en ancestry. She lives on the Burns Lake reserve in British Columbia. She had just arrived home when reached by phone. She took the conversational ball and ran with it.

"I'm changed. I don't know if I can explain it, but I'm changed right to my roots.

"I have a pride in my culture that I didn't have before. Mine is a dying culture, and I didn't care before, but now I do. I'm going to learn the language and the history and traditions. I'm not going to let it die.

"I'm also going to learn Spanish, because I'm going back. I guess I used to feel sorry for myself because I thought I was poor. Now I know what poor really is."

A call found Andy Topilak in Edmonton. The 20-year-old Inuit was on his way home to Kugluktuk, Nunavut, (formerly Coppermine). His fellow AYES call him "the quiet one." His was the longest journey, taking three days to get home from Nicaragua.

He was also the most likely to suffer culture shock. His home town has a population of 1,300, and if there's one thing he's used to, it's elbow room.

The crowded streets of Managua, with a carnival happening, made him uncomfortable.

"I couldn't take it," he says. "I went back to the room."

He used to feel his remote location was part of being disadvantaged. Now he sees it as an asset. He too feels closer to his culture, something he says he didn't think much about before this experience. He doesn't know why he was so affected.

He said he plans to go back next year and, in the meantime, he's going to study. "I want them to know about my culture. I'm now more proud of my culture."

AYES volunteers don't get a free ride. They have to raise as much as \$2,000 each to get on the go list.

Once they explain what they want to do, and show stories and pictures of the plight of the poorest of Central America, they get community involvement and support.

Then they get to spend 12 days of long hours, mixing cement by hand and hauling and laying cement blocks to help build a school. Although this most recent trip didn't involve work at the village of the dump scavengers, they were invited to take part in a soccer game there.

Discovering and meeting kids who can't afford a pencil or a toothbrush left its mark.

So did seeing families in hovels cobbled together from dump scraps, living where air, soil and water were polluted to a toxic level.

There's a proverb with origins in India. "I complained because I had no shoes. Then I met a man who had no feet."

Neither Andy nor Danielle knew there are only three races on Earth, and they are designated not by skin, but by hair.

When cut diagonally, Caucasian hair is round, Negroid hair is flat, and Mongol (Asian) hair is oblong. Natives of the Americas are Asian. Perhaps they sensed that racial kinship. (The people of India are Caucasian.)

In 2008 Affleck's idea generated enough money and volunteers to build and equip two cement block schools in Nicaragua, as well as hand out thousands of kits of toothbrush and paste, and pencil and pad.

SchoolBOX is a registered charity and donations can be made through its website at [www.schoolbox.ca](http://www.schoolbox.ca), which also gives a mailing address. SchoolBOX, c/o Treasurer Ann Bird, 2634 Eighth Line of Ramsay, R.R. 1, Almonte, Ont., K0A 1A0. Affleck's phone is in his pocket, 416-668-5582.

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