

# Deans rolls up her sleeves in Nicaragua

Erin McCracken  
erin.mccracken@metroland.com

Gloucester-Southgate Coun. Diane Deans is back to her council duties after a whirlwind trip to Nicaragua to help construct a much-needed addition to a school in that Central American country.

The councillor spent 10 days, from Feb. 11 to 22, in a remote village outside of León, Nicaragua, with 10 prominent Ottawa women, who all rolled up their sleeves to build two additional classrooms onto the school for kindergarten to Grade 6 students.

"It was an unbelievable, once-in-a-lifetime opportunity," Deans said. "I've never done anything like that before."

Given her work in community building here at home in her ward, Deans said she couldn't pass up the opportunity to do more of that, but in a very remote part of the world where people are "far less fortunate than we are."

"I am a great believer in education and I recognize that there is a true link between the level of education of a country and the gross domestic product," she said, adding the better educated people become, the better able they are to contribute to the wealth of their countries.

Travelling to the remote village by van was an adventure in itself since the makeshift road was more like a dirt path in places.

"We were slowed down some days because of cattle crossings and horse crossings," Deans said of the 17-kilometre journey into the village from the main road.

Once there, the group was warmly welcomed by the villagers, including 93 students and four teachers at the two-room El Porvenir school. It was so cramped, a makeshift shelter with desks parked underneath on a dirt floor had been set up nearby to accommodate the overflow of students.

It was Deans' job to bend rebar into rectangle shapes, helping the two new classrooms take shape,



COUN. DIANE DEANS/INSTAGRAM

**Gloucester-Southgate Coun. Diane Deans helps build a school addition in a remote Nicaraguan village during a recent trip with a group of prominent Ottawa women.**

with assistance from construction workers, who mentored the Canadians as they worked to give a boost to the village where there are few resources.

Families there had limited access to water and many of the homes only had dirt floors, while none had refrigeration.

"I'm told most of the families live on less than \$2 a day," Deans said.

That's where the registered charity, SchoolBOX, established by Almonte's Tom Affleck in 2006, comes in. It builds schools

and provides supplies in Nicaraguan communities, making education possible for children. It was through this organization, that Deans' group travelled south.

"I fundamentally believe that every child has a right to an education," Deans said.

According to SchoolBOX's website, 57 million kids around the world are not in school, and another 69 million have not finished their primary education.

As well, only 51 per cent of Nicaraguan children

make it to Grade 5.

"Unicef estimates that half a million Nicaraguan children between the age of three and 17 aren't in the education system because they're in rural areas and they're in poor families," Deans said, noting that one of the barriers is a lack of schools.

Since SchoolBOX was founded, it has built 75 schools in Nicaragua, she said.

Despite the poverty in the village, Deans, who paid her own way to participate in the build, said she was struck by the positive outlook among villagers.

"The children were beautiful and really well adjusted. There wasn't a bad attitude among them," she recalled. "And there were tears in their eyes when we left."

The trip has not only forged incredible memories, but has offered some life lessons for Deans.

"I think the power of community was very evident there and the importance of volunteering and lending a helping hand when you can," she said.

"It makes you want to do it again just because you realize we take a lot for granted in our country."

For SchoolBOX information and details, visit [schoolbox.ca](http://schoolbox.ca).