



Bridlewood family builds 99th classroom in Nicaragua

BY JESSICA CUNHA

Children in grades 3 and 4 in a Nicaraguan coastal town will now be able to learn inside a classroom thanks to the support of a Bridlewood family.

Dina Bell-Laroche travelled to Nicaragua for the third time to build Tracy's Hope Classroom No. 2, the 99th classroom built through SchoolBOX and the second in memory of her sister Tracy Lee Nolan. She raised more than \$29,000 for the project, which will also help renovate the existing school where the class was built.

"I was really deeply touched to know it was contributing to a larger community," she said. "I have never in my life felt so appreciated. You walk into the community and the kids are running out of the gate to hug you ... It's pretty remarkable."

Not only has the experience made education more accessible, it's also been a cathartic process, she said. "What it's allowed for in me is a process of healing and transformation. Tracy's Hope made it possible for me to be at peace with what is. And I never thought that I could be at peace with her death."

Nolan died of cancer at age 29. A counsellor at a youth correctional facility in Ottawa, she believed strongly in helping children, said Bell-Laroche.

"Tracy loved children and they loved her," said Bell-Laroche. "Her classrooms create a space and a place of learning that allows hope to happen."

A local charity based in Almonte, SchoolBox helps children in Nicaragua stay in primary school by building classrooms, libraries and providing learning materials.

"Our mandate is to get kids

through primary school. That's the most difficult part because half the kids don't get past primary school," said Jon Tam, acting executive director at SchoolBOX. "We've built 100 classrooms all over the country,

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- Dina Bell-Laroche

which is fantastic, and we've put in about 75 mini libraries around the country ... On a micro level we've been able to see children who have dropped out of school be encouraged to re-enroll in classes and go on to high school."

According to statistics compiled by SchoolBOX, only 48 per cent of students in Nicaragua completed

Grade 6 studies in 2007. By 2012, that number had risen to 56 per cent.

Bell-Laroche saw the impacts first hand on her most recent trip while visiting Tracy's Hope Classroom No. 1, built a handful of years ago. More roads have been paved around the community, additional homes have been built and a well was installed to provide clean drinking water.

"It was really powerful to see that come to life and to see the difference it's made. Now they're going to need another classroom, they're busting at the seams," said Bell-Laroche, who is now a board member with SchoolBOX. "You build it, they will come. People start to migrate around the school. It creates a sense of community."

Two of Bell-Laroche's children, Reece and Elica Laroche, travelled over the March break to build the

classroom, along with another five adults and four youth.

"It's been something that me and my family had been planning for a while. My mom went with my older sister (Talia) in 2013," said Reece, 15. "It's just a kind thing to do for others – sometimes you need to give back. There's some very underprivileged kids down in Nicaragua and we wanted to help them out and make education possible down there."

Aside from construction, Reece and the other youth also spent time playing sports and making jewelry with children in the community.

"They're so grateful for what little they have, and they love the company," he said. "I do want to go back, see the progress. I also want to meet all the kids again. It really was something special."

For more information, visit schoolbox.ca.