

I woke to the sound of a message coming through on the phone. It was 5.30am but I was quickly alert as it could only be Colm contacting me at that time. It had been nearly a week since there had been any news. I was quite used to that, but yet the dull ache of loneliness for my youngest son had begun to throb.

I know it's silly, but I hadn't had a telephone conversation for a number of weeks and I longed to hear his voice over the almost 5,000 miles that separated us. I slipped out of bed and crept downstairs. I didn't want to wake the sleeping household. I curled up on the couch and pressed his name. The tone began to purr.

"Hi Mom, how's everybody?" The warm feeling of love for my son spread from my toes up through my body. It was a great fix for any mother. Of course, I didn't reveal my feelings to Colm or I might not get a call for a month because of my sopiness! So instead I strained to hear his voice through a poor line.

It had been three weeks since Colm departed for Nicaragua with the UCD Volunteers Overseas (UCDVO), and as I listened I was getting a sense of the construction project in Las Palmiras.

They only had a week left to complete the building that would be used as a preschool for the children of the area. His messages were a mixture of extreme satisfaction at the work they had completed to date, and a bit of



€3,000 for the charity. He was truly humbled by the response. Since he has gone, people in the neighbourhood regularly stop and ask me how Colm is getting on. This is the nice thing about donating to someone you know – it is easy to find out just where your money is being spent. I find that people really like to know about the project.

Last weekend their volunteering stint finished and Colm had time to send a lengthy text to us all. The big news was that all their projects were completed on schedule.

PAST PROJECTS

On the tour of past projects undertaken by the charity, Colm was very impressed.

"The classroom that I helped build in 2010 now has 40 students in it studying agribusiness and the school has 120 students," said Colm.

"It is a very similar organisation to Teagasc, but for students to get into the class a parent, usually father, must pledge them a piece of land which they can then use to practice the new techniques which they learn for growing maize and coffee beans. It is a great service which is increasing production and incomes. In 2007 and 2008 the UCDVO built health centres in rural communities and it is great to see these are being put to good use, full of babies and young mothers. Last year's project was the construction of a top-class food processing centre to help locals get a better price for

A great success for UCD volunteers

frustration because some of their targets were being delayed due to local issues. As he was a student leader this time, it was his business to address such problems. He was also excited because the five leaders would be visiting projects that the volunteers had completed over the last number of years. Colm was particularly anxious to return to the 2010 project that they had built on his first trip to Nicaragua.

I tried to grasp a sense of the work that they were doing. This time they were staying with families in an area near the town of Leonn. He said there were about 40 houses in the area, all built by the UCDVO.

The people who lived in these houses had been relocated from the poorer areas of the town of Somoto. Colm stayed with a young couple who had one little boy and



As Katherine O'Leary longs to hear her youngest son's voice over the 5,000 miles that separate them, she recalls the important reason why he's volunteered in Nicaragua

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he found sharing their home a fascinating experience.

FUNDRAISING

The fact that Colm had returned for the second time came across clearly in his accounts. Some of the volunteers had been extremely ill with tummy issues, but he had escaped. He had avoided foods that looked anyway dodgy, preferring to go hungry rather than risk sickness. His strategy had paid off. His stamina was also good from working on the farm and his stint in New Zealand helped too.

Before Colm could travel he

had to raise €2,500. He held a table quiz but he was still a long way off his target. As time was running out we decided to hold a coffee morning at home. On that Saturday morning the sun was splitting the stones.

Colm had distributed flyers to all the neighbours and I'd sent out a few to reliable friends. They came in their droves, laden with cakes and goodwill, and they deposited generously into the box. Those that couldn't come sent a donation.

As the money was counted, Colm realised he'd raised over

their food. Another great success.”

Colm was known as *lechero*, which is the Spanish for dairy farmer. Other volunteers have been teaching English in the school, while all of them have been teaching English in Somoto every evening after work. Of this, Colm says it has improved his Spanish and helped the volunteers to integrate with the young people in the community. No wonder there was no time to send texts to Mom.

This year, projects ran in India, Haiti, Tanzania and Nicaragua. If you would like more information on UCDVO visit www.ucdvo.org or visit their facebook page www.facebook.com/ucdvo to see pictures from this year's projects.

Thank you to all the cousins, friends and neighbours who supported Colm and all the volunteers. **CL**