

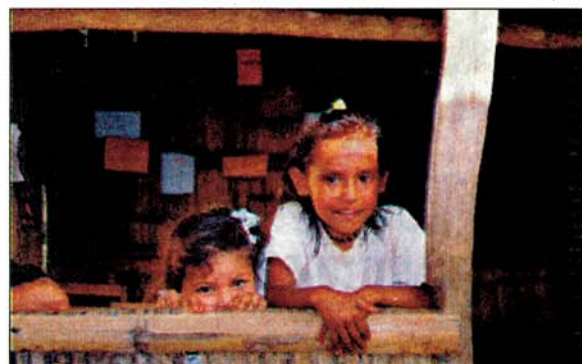
## Community Voices Called to Serve



**Children in Waslala, Nicaragua,** fetch drinking water from a cistern that is polluted with pesticides, fecal matter and soil.

**Two second-grade girls** at their school in Santa Maria Kubali. In Waslala, education is usually offered only through fourth grade.

# In a jungle, a new path



*Villanova graduate Matt Nespoli, once a computer science major, is bringing water to Nicaraguan towns.*

**The Villanova group crosses** a river via a log on the way to the community of Santa Maria Kubali.

### Matt Nespoli

is a 2004 graduate of Villanova University

**T**here's something magical — and extremely odd — about celebrating your 20th birthday in the middle of a Nicaraguan jungle.

In the summer of 2002, several of my peers from Villanova University prompted me to join them for a two-week service-learning trip to a rural region of Nicaragua called Waslala. Having lived in Delaware County my entire life, the idea of seeing a completely new world intrigued me.

At the time, I was a sophomore studying computer science. My lifelong goals defined the quintessential (Italian) American dream: get a high-paying job, have a huge family and live in suburban, sheltered bliss. These were my ingredients for happiness, and I had no reason to believe they would ever change.

Soon enough, I was bumping up and down in the bed of an old red Toyota pickup truck, traveling on an unpaved road through the mountains of Nicaragua.

The majority of our trip was concentrated in Waslala, a municipality three times the size of Philadelphia that consists of 85 rural communities and 45,000 residents. I spent many hours traveling throughout Waslala in that red truck, observing neighborhood after neighborhood of dirt-floor shacks with no electricity, telephones, water or sanitation. I was frequently overwhelmed by stories of female sexual abuse, drug addictions, unemployment and government corruption. In one community, every woman claimed she did not know how to read or write. I couldn't believe places like Waslala still existed in 2002.

Yet during those two weeks, I was the happiest I had ever been in my life. The Waslalan people manifested, in spite of their tremendous suffering, an unquantifiable joy and energy every day. Their ability to give of themselves without hesitation turned a potentially hellish area into the most beautiful place I had ever seen.

An example: One night we visited the house of a man and daughter whose wife had recently died.

The entire community gathered at the family's house and stayed through the night, praying, singing songs, and sharing stories and memories. The neighbors came back every night for nine nights, to show their love and support.

Soon after celebrating my 20th birthday in Waslala, we headed home, and I was back at Villanova. I had a job as a programmer for the computer science department that summer — an ideal experience for eventually landing a high-paying job.

There was just one problem: I returned home from Nicaragua with my priorities reshaped. I no longer wanted to live for myself, but rather to emulate the many Waslalan people who lived so selflessly and beautifully. I also knew I could not continue with my everyday life and ignore the unacceptable poverty I had seen in Waslala. I had to find a way to use my education and my skills to help the Waslalan people in some way.

During my senior year, I came up with an idea to address what seemed the most acute issue in Waslala. See **NICARAGUA** on L7

# In the jungle, finding a new path

## **NICARAGUA** from L1

la: the lack of clean drinking water for more than 25,000 people. Contaminated water causes severe health problems, such as diarrhea and parasitosis, particularly among children and the elderly. My idea was to design a project, Water for Waslala (WfW), that would provide the expertise and money necessary to build dozens of community water systems over the next several years.

First, I immediately asked for help from the engineering department at Villanova University. They agreed, sent two professors to study water quality in Waslala, and have since designed a low-cost water system for use in Nicaragua.

Second, I appealed for support to the Augustinian Volunteers, a not-for-profit organization based in Philadelphia. They agreed, and since graduating in May, I have been living in Old City, working full time as an Augustinian volunteer and directing Water for Waslala under their auspices.

Third, I established a partnership with Agua Para la Vida, an engineering technical school in Nicaragua. We are now training several Waslalans there to design, implement and maintain water systems funded by our project.

I spend the majority of my time trying to raise the \$100,000 needed to support my work in Waslala. I'm focusing on speaking and fund-raising in high schools, colleges and parishes in Pennsylvania, New Jersey and Delaware. My goal with each presentation is to unite our local community with the Waslalan community to help overcome this problem. I also encourage students to use their own education and skills to serve the poor throughout their lives. Three months into the volunteer year, I have spoken in 12 schools and collected \$25,000, a promising start to what I hope will be a successful year.

My life has drastically changed, all because of two simple weeks in Nicaragua. I hope Water for Waslala is just my first step in a lifetime of service to the poor. I owe them. They showed me how to truly live.