

# Lives of Nicaraguans, Rainbow Network efforts chronicled in 'Over the Rainbow'

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*(Photo: Stephen Sonheim/Courtesy of the Rainbow Network)*

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Keith Jaspers first approached Linda Leicht about writing a book while the journalist was still working for the Springfield News-Leader. She had no time, she said. But after Leicht retired from the daily newspaper in 2014, Jaspers, founder and director of the faith-based nonprofit Rainbow Network, asked again.

“God’s timing is always impeccable,” writes Leicht in the forward to ‘Over the Rainbow: How God’s Rainbow Promise is Being Fulfilled in Rural Nicaragua,’ recently released by Bolivar’s Quiet Waters Publications.

“I was not feeling fulfilled ... and my nonagenarian mother had moved in with me. I needed to spend more time at home, and I needed to do something that had meaning for me. Rainbow Network provided that.”

Leicht knew the subject matter well. She had written about Rainbow numerous times as a ‘faith’ reporter, even visiting Nicaragua along with a photographer in 2004 for a series of

stories about the work Rainbow was doing in the impoverished, rural areas of the country. But the idea of a book was daunting, as Leicht had only written for newspapers. She overcame any self-doubt by approaching the book the same way she would a newspaper story.



**Mothers in the communities prepare the afternoon meals for the school children, as well as pregnant and nursing mothers, the elderly and the ill. (Photo: Stephen Sonheim/Courtesy of the Rainbow Network)**

Leicht traveled to rural communities embracing the Rainbow Network, initially doing “quick hit” interviews with 100 or more people. She returned to expand on some of those initial interviews with more in-depth discussions in people’s homes, returning again with volunteers, church groups and medical teams to get a sense of their piece of the Rainbow mission puzzle. She attended housing dedications and anniversary parties before beginning to string the stories together for the book.

### [Rainbow Network builds 1,000th house in Nicaragua](#)

“My work as a reporter really came into play here, because I wrote these stories in much the same way I would have written them for a newspaper article. Each one kind of stands on its own. Each one I make sure everything they’re telling me is true. I check out what

they're saying, talk to other people to make sure that all of this is accurate. Anybody reading the book that says 'I want to meet that person' can meet them. They're there; they're real people; they are available," said Leicht.

Rainbow Network's story begins with Keith and Karen Jaspers. After meager and humble beginnings, the couple and their growing family prospered. The couple decided that if they ever accomplished financial success they would share it.



Education is one of the most important elements of the Rainbow Network model. Children not only learn at Rainbow schools, they can get scholarships to high school and beyond. And they get a nutritious meal every school day. *(Photo: Rainbow Network)*

"The way I understand the Bible, as Christians, we should help people, especially the poor," said Keith in the book.

In 1983, Jaspers got involved with Habitat for Humanity, serving on the board of directors for seven years. Not long after, he struck out on his own and launched Rainbow.

His criteria for the project was three-fold: the work had to be something that wouldn't happen without Rainbow's help, the mission had to be near enough to travel to in one day and the community had to take an active role in the group's initiatives.

Nicaragua was the perfect fit.



Keith and Karen Jaspers used their life experiences, from growing up on a farm in Iowa to running successful businesses, and Keith serving on the board of Habitat for Humanity International, to envision an organization that helped the poor to become self-sufficient. That was the vision that became The Rainbow Network. *(Photo: Stephen Sonheim/Courtesy of the Rainbow Network)*

During the first year, 15 homes were built in the community of Filo de Cuajachillo near the capital city of Managua, as the newly-launched organization began working to help the country's poor rebuild their lives after a revolution, a civil war, earthquakes, hurricanes and economic disasters.

Currently, more than 1,000 homes have been built, and Rainbow has grown from a small, family-centered foundation to a wide-ranging organization. A staff of about 40 Nicaraguans oversees programs that address housing, health care, education and economic development.



**Manuel de Jesus Martinez Alegria breaks into a big smile when he talks about his success.** *(Photo: Stephen Sonheim/Courtesy of the Rainbow Network)*

More than 50,000 children have received an elementary school education at a Rainbow school. Many have gone on to high school in communities where the literacy rate was as low as 10 percent. More than 50 million meals have been served at the feeding centers in Rainbow Network schools.

But Leicht's book focuses on much more than numbers. It's the personal accounts that tell the Rainbow story.

Maria Mendez, a mother of seven, was abandoned by her husband. Through an interest-free loan of a few thousand dollars from Rainbow, Mendez now owns her concrete-block house. She also serves as a community housing coordinator in her village.



Even the youngest members of recipient families help to build the homes in the Rainbow Network housing project. (Photo: Rainbow Network)

A single mother raised Auner Medal. Paying for high school was not an option, but Medal was able to go with a Rainbow scholarship. Medal attended a Rainbow Network group called “Young Entrepreneurs” that helped him learn skills to start a business. He’s now an attorney.

Alba de los Angeles Calero walked seven miles to attend high school through a Rainbow scholarship. Then, like all Rainbow children who receive assistance, she returned to her village to tutor others. She now has a job teaching students in the same school where she received her education.

“The Nicaraguan people participate in committees, they will volunteer to help their neighbors and they will pay back a loan. They run with our projects,” said Jaspers.

“We go into these rural communities and there is nobody helping them. There are children literally starving to death because there is no food available. Many of these communities have never had a modern or educated physician or modern medicines. So we come in and bring these things and we’re the first to ever do that and they want to participate. It’s all about them doing for them. We give them the resources and show them how and then we stay with them for a period of years until then can do those things for themselves.”



**Dr. Veronica Chavarria is one of 10 Rainbow Network doctors who regularly hold medical clinics in each of the more than 140 Rainbow Network communities. Dr. Veronica's smile puts children and adults at ease, and the medical care she gives them is an essential part of crating healthy communities. (Photo: Stephen Sonheim/Courtesy of the Rainbow Network)**

Wesley United Methodist in Springfield has assisted the rural poor in Nicaragua for a number of years, sending medical and construction teams to the areas they serve. The church is currently raising funds to buy land for a new network of Rainbow homes, said Stacie Williams, executive pastor at Wesley, adding that it's the personal relationships forged through the partnership that mean the most.

"It's not just giving them money, but walking alongside them, letting them know we have faith in their ability," said Williams.



**Dr. Candido Calderius Rios uses a portable ultrasound machine to see the position of a woman's unborn baby. Dr. Candido, as he is known, joined the Rainbow Network staff in 2007 and has found faith and fulfillment in his work.** (Photo: Stephen Sonheim/Courtesy of the Rainbow Network)

“It gives us the opportunity to reach our neighbors. We consider our neighbors to be not only those next door to us but those that live in faraway places that are in need. We don't want to just give a handout. We want to give a hand up. They do all the work, we just walk alongside them,” added Williams.

Luke Nixon also provides aid to Nicaraguans. He discovered a Rainbow flyer in the back of a pew at his church, Springfield's Kingsway United Methodist. He thought it a worthwhile organization and began donating funds. A couple of years later, he was invited to go to Nicaragua to see close-up the work Rainbow was doing.

Nixon flew into Managua and with others took a van into the mountains each day and visited various communities where Rainbow has set up feeding centers, schools and housing for rural Nicaraguans.



Alma de los Angeles Calero grew up too poor to go to school, but when Rainbow Network arrived, she was able to get a scholarship for high school and teacher's college. Now she teaches the children in her community so they can succeed, too. (Photo: Rainbow Network)

"I remember distinctly after landing, I thought, 'What am I doing here?' But I felt this kind of pull. Each day, at the end of the day, I would ask myself again, 'Why am I here? This is all wonderful stuff and it's great what these people are doing but I don't know why I'm here.'"

He found out on his last day in Nicaragua, Nixon said, when an older woman came into a health center carrying a young boy with clubfeet. The boy would never walk without surgery, something he was not going to acquire without assistance.

"At that point I knew why I was supposed to go to Nicaragua, added Nixon who donated the money for the boy's operation. "(My going) was completely by accident – or maybe not," Nixon said.

Nixon gives props to Rainbow founder Jaspers, who deflects attention when given.



**Making a home out of a house of sticks and mud is a challenge for the poor in many areas of rural Nicaragua.** (Photo: Stephen Sonheim/Courtesy of the Rainbow Network)

“Keith and the people at the Rainbow Network are absolutely selfless, just fabulous people. What they do is absolutely tremendous. I will trumpet their praise at the drop of a hat. Keith is a very humble man, but he downplays the impact he’s had on that country. I can’t speak highly enough of him,” said Nixon.

“I think it’s Keith’s business sense that really works here,” said Leicht. “While he does this out of his faith, he uses good business sense to keep this operating in a way that’s successful and doesn’t waste money. You can see it in Nicaragua.”

Leicht said the point of her book is to bring attention to Rainbow and to garner support for the organization’s work. “This is amazing stuff and we need to tell people about it,” she said, adding that her targeted audiences are those who already support Rainbow and want to deepen their connection; church groups who might read the book together; and those who don’t know about Rainbow and might become supporters.



**Camillo Marengo went from a field laborer to a farmer who employs his neighbors to help harvest his crops of pineapples. Through Rainbow Network micro loans and training, Camillo is a successful businessman and a leader in his community. (Photo: Rainbow Network)**

“So far, I know of at least one person who read the book and became a supporter of Rainbow Network. It’s my cousin. She and her husband are going to take a trip down there,” Leicht said.

“We love the book, I think it’s a great book,” said Jaspers. “It’s definitely not a book about me or a book about my efforts, it’s a book about the people of Nicaragua and how they have worked with and used the Rainbow Network programs to change their own lives. That’s really the book I wanted,” said Jaspers.

“What we need is more people involved with Rainbow so that Rainbow can go to the next level. We’ll be in 178 communities here in a couple months, but we’re capable of being in 500 communities in rural Nicaragua. To do that we need more churches, more people, more help and more ideas and leadership both here and there. We need people at all levels.”



Rainbow Network micro loan recipients make a public oath before their neighbors and God to repay their loans and even agree to take on the debt of their fellow borrowers if they fall behind. The loan program has been an important economic engine for both the communities and for Rainbow Network. *(Photo: Stephen Sonheim/Courtesy of the Rainbow Network)*