Rachel Sebold's job title includes sister, wife, aunt and mother. She works with Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos, meaning Our Little Brothers and Sisters, in English, her role there being to work as a sister. Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos (NPH) is an international organization that has acted as an orphanage and more for over 15,000 children in eight different countries throughout Latin America and the Caribbean (Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos). The organization describes its mission as, “to provide shelter, food, clothing, healthcare and education in a Christian family environment” (Nuestros Pequeños Hermanos). Rachel works with NPH as a wife because both she and her husband, Matt, work as a team to provide love and support to the boys in their “family.” Rachel and Matt have the titles of Tia and Tio, meaning aunt and uncle, for their positions within NPH. In their work as tia and tio they are challenged and changed as they act as the surrogate mothers and fathers for the children in each age group. These titles are only pieces of the whole in the way in which Rachel’s work creates a family for a small group of street boys that, in turn, forms movements of a stronger family community for the world.

Rachel is a twenty-some, newly-wed, grad student from Minnesota. Although her structured time of service is up, and she currently is in Minnesota working on her Master’s, she remains heavily involved with her life and family in Nicaragua. She sends packages with clothes, supplies and treats at least once a week. Aside from Rachel calling down to chat and check up, the current Tia in charge of her boys has, on occasion, called Rachel as a form of punishment and reprimand when someone has misbehaved. She is still very much a mother to the eleven boys that were in her family group.
So how did a young Minnesota college student wind up creating a family and finding work on an island in the middle of Nicaragua? It makes more sense than it might seem at first glance. Much of vocation comes from the experiences that make us who we are. I’ve known for a long time that I have wanted to serve in Latin America. In many ways, I feel like my whole life has been preparing me for it. I have taken Spanish since I was five, and I have always loved the language and culture that fills the Latin America. My faith has continued to grow in me day after day as I become more passionate about the call that I hear to be with the poor. I feel that this call I hear is very similar to the call that Rachel Sebold heard. Often, it seems as though the vocation of international aid is backed by a specific love of different cultures, global interest, social awareness, and quite often, deep faith. These qualities can be found in Rachel’s history before she began her work in Nicaragua. Rachel had done service work all throughout high school and had travelled to Central America on mission trips many times before. She also had a background in Spanish which supported her in achieving fluency after becoming a tia and working with the boys daily. Rachel was head of the Lasallian Youth service group at her high school, and continued her studies at Gonzaga University, a Jesuit school dedicated to faith and service. Although both she and Matt grew up in the twin cities, they first met in college. They both knew that they needed an intensive service experience, and so, after their sophomore years, they travelled to Nicaragua together. They chose NPH most simply because it was the only organization that would allow them to be together even though they weren’t yet a married couple, but they also liked the organization’s philosophy and work.

The first year that Matt and Rachel were down in Nicaragua, they worked mainly as extra hands. They were working in the “Baby House,” the section of the orphanage for boys younger than seven. The orphanage is divided into four houses with young boys in one, older boys in the
next, and then young girls and older girls. However, during their second year, they moved up with the boys they already knew into the older house located on the Island of Ometepe in the middle of Lake Nicaragua. The change was both rewarding and challenging. It was nice that they were with boys that they already knew; however, now Rachel and Matt were not just the fun people who played games and helped with activities. Rachel and Matt were now their tia and tio who were present with the children twenty-four hours a day in both the good moments and the bad. This was a hard transition to make, so hard that Rachel describes it as “hell” and “the worst month of our lives.”

“By month two it was flowing pretty easily,” recalls Rachel who described the heavily structured environment that was developed to help the “really tough kids.” The boys in Rachel and Matt’s family were “straight off the streets.” They had been abandoned and hurt many times before and would often act out from that pain and a fear of getting hurt again. It was for this reason that a strict schedule had to be developed to create a safe environment. Matt and Rachel were up at 4:00 a.m. with the boys to begin their chores followed by breakfast, school, study time, more work around the house and then bed by 8:00 p.m. This ordered routine along with “a lot of consequences” when there was trouble created a healthy community for the boys to live in. Ultimately though, Rachel explains that it is immense, exhausting love that each boy needs most. Rachel cannot deny that it hurts a lot when a boy curses at you or throws something at you. It takes a lot of understanding and compassion to move through it and continue to offer your love.

The perspective of a gentle compassion that Rachel and Matt promoted was not the same among many of their co-workers. While of course the orphanage did not allow abuse, the other tios used what some may think of as an old-fashioned way of discipline. Many tios called Rachel and Matt crazy both openly and behind their backs for not hitting a child who acts out. The views
on discipline were very different between Rachel and Matt and the other tias and tios, all of whom were local Nicaraguans. The other tios did not believe that this new approach could be effective, and this belief was especially strong and loudly voiced during that first difficult month. However, once an understanding developed within Matt and Rachel’s family, the other tios began to notice the unknown success that they were having. Some tios even took back the comments they had made about the assumed stupidity of their approach when they were saying goodbye to Matt and Rachel at the end of their second year. However, Rachel made it clear that although the tios noticed the strength of a less forceful approach, they made no changes within their own families.

Rachel attributed this to a couple of things. First, as all of the other tios were locals they seemed to look at their work as more of just a job rather than any sort of calling or work to truly believe in. Rachel also noticed the great lack of education in Nicaraguans, something that she believes explains not only the views on discipline, but also beliefs in the realm of gender and superstition.

Aside from being the only white tia, Rachel was also the only woman head in the boys’ home. She is frustrated by all of the ways in which the other tios regard her differently from Matt. First, at any time when the tios came together for a meeting Rachel was not included. Even though she could be sitting there with everyone else, the Nicaraguan men would always address Matt with anything regarding their family. The same was true when Rachel and Matt would walk around together: the men would say “hi” to Matt but say nothing to Rachel. Overall, Rachel was continually sent the message that she does not have the intelligence or authority of her partner.

Rachel was also bothered by her co-workers different cultural beliefs. As seen in Tracy Kidder’s *Mountains Beyond Mountains*, aid workers face a conflict in balancing an
understanding and respect for native beliefs with the ideas more widely accepted by the more
developed world. It is a conflict that I have often encountered through my experience as an
international service major. There are a variety of questions which go along with this challenge.
For example, is it possible to become too assimilated to the point where you are no longer
removed enough from the crisis to be of help? Or, does holding on to your convictions keep you
isolated from the perspective necessary in order to best understand what is needed. There is no
one answer to any of these questions, and different individuals and organizations choose to
address the matter in different ways. In Rachel’s case, she chose to brush off the superstitions
that she feels are a sign of the lack of education among the people. Some of her encounters with
the superstitions include being told not to go out alone after dark because of La Mona (a sort of
boogeyman), and that Matt had gotten sick because she was pregnant (she was not).

The lack of education in Nicaragua was something that Rachel noticed made a huge
effect throughout life there. This is one main reason why Rachel does not believe that she could
raise her own family there: the “educational system sucks.” Although she will admit she prefers
the weather there and the option to go to the beach every afternoon, she thinks she will stay in
the U. S. with all of its comforts and strong educational system. However, there has been talk of
bringing some of their Nicaraguan “sons” up to live and study in the states. “That all depends on
how far they choose to go in their education,” she says. While she hopes that all of her children
will continue to work hard in their studies, oftentimes the boys who are in such challenging
positions choose different paths.

Rachel stated that nothing could have prepared her for the work they did. Each child and
each day is different. The ancient Greeks that she studied for her undergraduate degree in
philosophy gave her no useful insight into dealing with the challenges she faced. Matt’s degree
in psychology was more helpful. The two of them would often talk of the ways in which stress and pain had affected the ways the boys thought and acted. While nothing could have truly prepared them for their work, Rachel does think that her experiences in Nicaragua will prepare her for other experiences that she will have in life. She hopes to be an elementary school teacher. When struggling with the boys, her practice with love and patience will teach her to see the root causes to challenges she will encounter with her students.

The challenges with the boys were great, and cannot be emphasized enough. Rachel often remembers feeling worn out, and did not know how she could move on the next day with a boy who had hurt her so continually. But "bedtime was the best." When Rachel and Matt would put the boys to sleep, they got a chance to see them when they were most vulnerable. They were no longer tough guys out on the streets, but instead were children who needed their backs rubbed and wanted to hear stories. It was a time for Rachel to be renewed. She could forget a hard day and go to bed knowing the sweetness of the boys and wake up the next morning ready to start all over again.

One of the biggest dangers in aid work is the way in which a person can get completely worn down. Rachel admits that it was, "definitely hard to know how much to give of herself." It is a challenge often felt by aid workers who are being immersed in the worst problems in desperate environments. In a report on posttraumatic stress disorder experienced by aid workers, the *Journal of Traumatic Stress* explains that, "In addition to cross-cultural and environmental stressors, aid workers and missionaries are frequently exposed to trauma" (Schaefer et al. 529). Despite her struggles, Rachel has left the environment feeling happy and healthy. She does, however, recall a coworker who left her experiences feeling quite differently. By the end of this young American girl's year at the orphanage, she was no longer pleasant. Rachel saw that she
couldn't see past the boy's violence and meanness to understand the love that they needed. Every day she would become more worn down and hurt, and Rachel says that she shouldn't have been there. She was no longer able to offer what the boys needed, but left hurt and hated the experience she had.

The contributors to the report on posttraumatic stress hypothesize about some of the reasons why some may not face psychological stress and pain. Two very important factors in maintaining better mental health are the natural level of resilience to traumatic situations that seems to be higher in many aid workers as well as important support systems. The higher level of resilience is attributed to the fact that aid workers feel a great importance in their work. They are impassioned and committed to their goals so much that they are willing and prepared to face challenges (Schaefer et al. 530). Some support systems mentioned are faith, religious congregations, and support programs designed by the worker's respective organization (Schaefer et al. 530-531).

Rachel may very well possess strong resilience, but she did not feel that she had any real support systems. During hard times Rachel and Matt turned to each other. They were undoubtedly strengthened by the support system that they have in one another, something that most of their coworkers did not have. Rachel believes that this lack of someone to lean on plays a big factor in why things turn negative for others.

Aside from the psychological dangers, there are also very real physical dangers. "Aid work is one of the most dangerous professions in the world," reports one article in The Economist ("More Dangerous Work Than Ever" 48). Many are vulnerable to violence prevalent in unstable areas. The violence and murders are rising with the residents of unstable areas viewing organizations as, "semi-official distributors of western government relief rather than
independent impartial agencies" ("More Dangerous" 49). While these are serious dangers, they were not great threats to Rachel because of the area in which they were working. As a result of working with children, the violence geared towards Rachel and Matt was not related to any frustrations with U.S. foreign policy. Also, Rachel explained that most Nicaraguans are amicable toward Americans unlike some people from other Latin American countries. The only trouble that Nicaraguans gave her was raising the prices because of the assumption that Americans could and would pay more.

Rachel and Matt are back in Minnesota now. Rachel is working for her Master’s Degree in Elementary Education and hopes to teach in the U.S. when she is done. The fact that neither Rachel nor Matt is still working in Nicaragua raises an important question: can international service work be a lifelong vocation or career? There are many positions, often designed with young people in mind, for one to three year service opportunities that will give valuable experience to launch the recently graduated into something more permanent. Is the nature of the vocation to be temporary? Perhaps the cause of this is the nature of the work in crisis situations. An article written by Sarah Packwood, a highly experienced humanitarian aid worker, discusses this idea. She reminds the reader that, "Often aid workers say that ‘we aim to do ourselves out of a job.’" Often programs are designed to relieve crisis and then allow the community to return to normal living, without the presence of the program (Packwood). However, there are many who make aid their career, or more likely, their life. As written by Tracy Kidder in Mountains Beyond Mountains, one example is seen in Paul Farmer, who, although he has been able to resolve crises in specific areas continues to develop his work. When one health crisis is resolved, Dr. Farmer is able to move on to another daunting task. In this world, we are never at a shortage of problems to be solved. Thus, a vocation in development can be answered in different ways. Whether it be for
a year, a lifetime, or somewhere in between, there is always work that calls the compassionate
and dedicated to service.

My interview with Rachel provided me with greater insight into the work that I hope to
do for the rest of my life. It is interesting to learn the ways in which her experience is both
similar and different from others with whom I have spoken. I believe that it speaks more broadly
to what Rachel had said about nothing being able to prepare her for the work she did. Each
experience and challenge faced will be different, and the best thing that I can do is prepare
myself to know how to best face new problems. It is a dangerous work with little chance for
raises or great benefits. Still, I feel similar to Rachel and so many others in having a call and
conviction to do work that will strengthen and connect human beings to form a better world
community.

Rachel worked with a small group of only seven boys. No matter how small the group or
how seemingly unimportant the impact, every person who follows the vocation to love is doing
the most important job. It is a love that is not lost when challenged by meanness or hurt. It does
not have strict definitions of family, nor does it have enemies. When people work to love in this
way, they are being true to a call that has been given to each of us to care for and uplift those
around us. This is Rachel's most important role in her family: to open doors wider and make
opportunities greater for a family that is much larger than seven orphaned boys and their tios.
Works Cited


