

It's been a while since I've written about a beautiful Nicaraguan tradition and after last night's "vela," I realized that I have to share the beauty of this custom with those of you who have been following me on my journey for the last (almost) two years.

When someone dies here in Nicaragua, amidst the mourning and sadness, the family and friends of that person immediately begin the task of preparing the house for the "vela." I don't want to cheat the word by directly translating it to "wake;" although like wakes in the US, the vela is a chance for the loved ones of the deceased to gather around the body, reminisce, reconnect, and show support for the family. A vela however, is much more than just a wake.

The day someone dies, his or her family must get the word out as they begin to prepare the house and the body for the vela. Here in my town, "getting the word out" almost always means paying the - directly translated - truck of publicity* to drive around every block announcing the death, a verbal obituary if you will, to the tune of a touching song about meeting again some day in Heaven. While this is going on, friends, neighbors and extended family of the deceased do all they can to emotionally, financially and physically help the family with the task at hand.

**The truck of publicity is a pickup with giant speakers on the back that rides around town announcing everything from deaths, to parties, to political campaigns. I've been told that one announcement costs about US\$20.*

The vela is held in the house of the deceased, which therefore means the body must be prepared, the casket bought, the flowers cut, the curtains hung, the coffee made, and the chairs rented and transported to the house all before sundown. Here in my little town of Belen, people chip in to help each other in any way they can. If the suffering family is very poor, people show up throughout the day with coffee and bread contributions for the night's activity. Neighbors walk around town collecting funds for the chair rental and the few who have vehicles offer their services at no cost. Lunches and dinners are cooked for the suffering, and all the women on the block can be found hanging the curtains, arranging the flowers, and cleaning the street out front.

As dusk begins to settle over the town, chairs are set up inside around the casket and outside on the street. Rows and rows of little, wooden, fold-up chairs face the house, sometimes taking up the entire block. People begin to wander in as soon as the sun starts to set. Some of them enter the house to pay their respects to the body, while others look for seats outside on the street. People show up with any contribution they can make to the family – fruits, vegetables, rice, sugar, oil, or when people have it, just plain cash. Comforting words and hugs are exchanged all night with those in the immediate family. Tears are shed at the casket, and memories are recounted outside on the street in the clusters of chairs that form and reform as the night goes on.

The purpose of the vela is that the body be accompanied until the moment it is buried the next day. This means that some people stay at the house or out on the block all night supporting the family and showing their devotion to the defunct. Men sit around makeshift tables playing cards or dominoes while younger boys gather around them to see who wins. Families and friends grieve, comfort, laugh, and talk for hours in the street. The women and girls in the family of the deceased, serve coffee and bread to their guests all night long. I've been told that rich families also serve liquor to the men.

As the night grows older, some head home, while others wander in for their turn to accompany the

family. In the morning, the church service is arranged and after mass, everyone accompanies the body as it is walked on the shoulders of the men in the family, from the church to the cemetery. Last words are said and family members gather around the body to see the face one last time before he or she is laid to rest.

The solidarity and support that flows so naturally into the velas here is absolutely beautiful. Everyone gives what little they can to support the grieving family. Then, in most cases, for nine days after the death, people gather at the same house at noon and at dusk to say the Rosary for the deceased. For nine days after, they continue praying for the peace of his/her soul and for the healing of the family left behind.