



**CELLPHONE IN HAND,** Kathy Adams is mobbed by kids wherever she goes in the Via Esperanza neighborhood, a collection of shacks along an old railway line north of Granada, Nicaragua. Children and adults all know the blonde “norte americana” who works to keep kids in school.

# Hope lives in barrio

They call it Via Esperanza, which means, roughly, Street of Hope. And hope is about all people here have.

More than a thousand live in this barrio, or slum, spread out along an abandoned narrow-gauge railroad line north of Granada, the old colonial capital of Nicaragua.

By the standards of civilization, it's not much of an existence. Families live under tin or plastic roofs, with walls patched together from what they have: cinder blocks for the better off, scrap wood, fiberglass panels, plastic sheeting. Floors are dirt.

There's running water from a tap in the middle of the yard at one home we visit, and everything is clean, but flies abound. Girls sprinkle the dish water on the yard and path to keep dust down. Pit toilets serve basic necessities.

Power lines run for miles through trees, with dangerous-looking taps snaking out of every house to connect lights and maybe a television.

People just came here when the railroad left and took over. Few have any kind of title to their land. The slum squats between a clothing factory, a soap plant and a chicken plant reportedly owned by Asian investors. Few residents have enough education to get those jobs, tough as they might be.

Life is not unpleasant in the winter, when dry, warm sunny weather prevails. In the summer, it just



**A TRAY OF PLANTAIN** snacks balanced on her head, Mar Luz Hernandez navigates the dirt streets.

rains. Streets turn to mud and water washes away the dust. Last year, floods took several houses.

But everyone smiles. Kids wear clean, serviceable clothes. They play and run and crowd around the viewfinder of your camera.

Kathy Adams tries to make a difference in Via Esperanza. She's sort of a one-woman show, helping kids stay in school so someday they'll have a better life. Her backup team includes a bunch of volunteers, plus a couple of employees, all Nicaraguan. Around the world, she has “virtual volunteers” who raise money and help with the website of her Empowerment International. (Go to [www.empowermentinternational.org](http://www.empowermentinternational.org), which has photos, information and a secure online donation form.)

Everything she does, she runs on a shoestring, Ms. Adams said. The budget this year is about \$40,000 to help 200 kids, but she'd like to double that to \$70,000 next year. The project needs money to pay workers, who make \$100 to \$300 a month (“That'd be middle class here,” she says.) and the director.

“I need to be paid something,” said Ms. Adams, who's sold her house in Longmont, Colo., and now lives in the project office in Granada.

So how does a blonde-haired software engineer wind up in the barrios of the Americas' second-poorest country, trying to save starfish one at a time?

“When I was a kid,” she says. “I (See HOPE on Page 2B)



**IN THE DOORWAY** of her home, Martha Rivas talks with visitors from the U.S. Her house is typical of the Nicaraguan barrio.

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**KIDS CROWD AROUND** to see their picture on Bill Jacobs' camera. The Mississippi publisher was part of a National Newspaper Association delegation to Nicaragua in January.