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Helping Build Communities

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Helping build communities



Kirsten Taylor '06, left, and Meredith Berthot '06 were two of 17 Linfield students who helped construct a Habitat for Humanity house in San Ramon, Costa Rica, as part of their semester abroad experience.

How long does it take to build a future? Some Linfield College students learned it could happen in just three days.

Working tirelessly alongside a Nicaraguan named Oscar, they transformed a bare concrete foundation into the house of Oscar's dreams.

The 17 Linfield students spent a weekend in September building houses for Habitat for Humanity in San Ramón, Costa Rica, as part of the Linfield semester abroad program. Based at the Universidad de Costa Rica in San José, the program provides opportunities to learn about the country's culture, history and traditions through class work, field trips and community service projects.

"When one of the Habitat coordinators asked whether anyone had anything to say about what had been accomplished in the three days, Oscar could not even get a word out, because his eyes had welled up with so many tears," said Lisa Anderson '06 of Salem. "The tiny Habitat houses that these people receive are more than most of them could have ever dreamed of."

The weekend trip gave the Linfield students the chance to roll up their sleeves and work side-by-side with locals, an important element in Linfield study-abroad experiences.

"We believe in service learning and volunteer work," said Mayra Herra, director of the Linfield semester program in Costa Rica. "In the past, students have developed projects in small groups or individually, but

this year we decided to work as a whole team, making the volunteer work more effective."

Prior to the weekend, students spent two weeks learning construction vocabulary, such as *carretilla* (wheelbarrow) and *pala* (shovel), and preparing for their tasks in San Ramón, a semi-rural town with a population of over 33,000.

Rebekah Jordan '07 of Tigard described it as a community "nestled between rolling green hills and sprawling farmlands, where the air is clean and fresh and there are no stoplights on the wide roads."

The work began as soon as the students entered San Ramón. A tour of other Habitat houses gave them their first chance to interact with the local community.

"It was special to see all of the children and pets happily running around (the Habitat houses)," said Kirsten Taylor '06 of Seattle. "I knew that their lives had been touched by volunteers like us."

The students assembled rebar, laid concrete blocks, shoveled rocks and made cement and mortar in a unique sifting process. They worked alongside the homeowners, who applied their own sweat equity.

The days were tough with extreme weather conditions, ranging from drenching rain to scorching sun and high humidity. But as the weekend progressed, students began to notice changes in themselves and the group.

"The work was hard and demanding, but we were always sad to see a day of work come to an end," said Elise Booth '05 of Genesee, Idaho. "We took pride in our work and what we accomplished in our days on the job."

Booth and her classmates were deeply moved by the experience. She said the opportunity to form personal bonds with the Costa Ricans was life changing.

"I came away with a satisfaction at having been a part of something bigger and more important than my own little world," Jordan said. "It felt so right to expend energy on something that would bring me no visible benefit, but the profit I gained was in the hope-filled eyes of the owner of the house as we worked side-by-side and he watched his future come together."

Every year a new group of Linfield students will venture to Costa Rica in late summer. They will also perform acts of community service, maybe similar, maybe different. Although the names, faces and scenes will change, Oscar and his neighbors will never forget the hard work of those 17 students. Nor will the Linfield students forget the experiences and lessons of those three days.

As Jordan put it, "What we did feels better than any day spent on a beach."

— Laura Graham '07