Helping Build Communities

Laura Graham ’07

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Helping build communities

Linfield College students left more than a newly constructed softball field and a freshly painted mural in Mexico last spring. They also left dozens of new friends and a bit of themselves.

The 11 students, who studied in Oaxaca for the semester, spent three weeks of service learning at Pimpollo orphanage, in the southernmost part of Mexico. There they drew upon their own skills and interests to help disadvantaged children. They painted a mural, built a softball field, and taught swimming lessons, English classes and kitchen hygiene.

The three-week experience went beyond examining cross-cultural issues and strengthening Spanish language skills, according to Tom Love, Linfield professor of anthropology, who directed the program.

“It was really about developing relationships,” he said. “These types of experiences build character and develop an attitude of citizenship, mutual respect, critical self-reflection and responsibility.”

Mary Doyle ’06, a studio art and political science major, painted a mural based on more than 70 drawings created by the children. The result was a sign for the orphanage incorporating flowers and a beach scene, with the kids’ blue hand prints creating ocean waves.

“Painting is a creative outlet that encourages kids to be themselves as opposed to their economic circumstances,” said Doyle.

At the orphanage, Linfield students came face-to-face with issues of poverty, domestic violence, child abuse and retardation. The children’s need for attention was palpable, Love said.

“You're instantly mobbed by kids who come up and hug you,” he added. “And they care for each other. You offer one a piece of candy and he makes sure every kid has a piece of it. It's very humbling and it makes you deeply question what's important.”

Erica Crossman ’05, Kim McGough ’05 and Emily Pierce ’05 constructed a softball field for the children. Crossman still remembers the smiles on the kids’ faces when she and the other Linfield students arrived each day.

“As soon as the kids saw us, they would run to help us,” said Crossman, a sociology major. “It was incredibly humbling to see how little they had and hear their stories of what they’d been through.”

Rachyl Stupor ’06, was particularly drawn to a 17-year-old who wanted to learn English and attend college.

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“More than anything, the experience showed Stupor how privileged she is as a United States citizen. She’s now more aware of how people use their resources and how it affects others around the world.”

“Never had to endure hardship,” she said. “Some of the kids had very difficult lives before they came to the orphanage. It was hard to face that, but it was an incredible experience.”

— Laura Davis

Developing cross-cultural relationships

Linfield College students learned it could happen in just three days.

The 17 Linfield students spent a weekend 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 students assembled rebar, laid concrete blocks, shoveled rock and made cement and mortar in a unique mixing process. They worked alongside the homeowners, who applied their own sweat equity.

“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 Geneseo, 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,” said Jordan. “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.”

Jordan is a part of a new group of students who 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

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.

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