

Students work alongside locals during Nicaragua service trip

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In snapshots beautifully captured by student volunteers, one can ascertain the depth of the experience of the participants in the Alternative Winter Break service trip to Nicaragua. In one photo, junior Matt Bergene carries a little boy on his back while extending a hand to help another small girl jump across a puddle. In another, students kneel together in a field, carefully tending to sprouting tomato plants in neat rows. Another photo shows the profile of a proud farmer, surveying his land. In another, a small boy stands on a pile of blocks and oversees the volunteers installing a latrine in his yard.

"I will take this experience with me wherever I go," Sophomore Eileen Walsh said. "I learned so much more from the Nicaraguan people than I could have ever taught them."

Students on the Nicaragua trip spent nine days in Central America. Three days included exploring the cities of Managua, Masaya, Granada, and the small town of Siuna.

Five days were spent volunteering with a nonprofit organization called Bridges to Community in the village of Tadanza, Siuna, in the rural and autonomous region of the northeast.

"We were the first group to be in Tadanza. That was a new community for Bridges to Community, so it was actually especially great because we got to be the first representatives of Bridges, as a sort of student delegation," Maribeth Saleem-Tanner, director of civic engagement and the staff adviser for the trip, explained. "We got to set the tone for the work in that community and to blaze the trail, which was awesome."

As the name implies, Bridges to Community uses a community-based approach to international development by enabling community lead-

ers to organize themselves and by helping determine what the community's most pressing needs are. Bridges then coordinates volunteers to work alongside locals in meeting these basic needs.

Students on the trip worked with the villagers of Tadanza to build latrines and stoves, both of which were locally-prioritized projects intended to improve the health and sanitation of the community. Some projects required volunteers to hike over an hour to reach particularly remote homes.

"I liked how real it was," Junior Matt Bergene said. "I was under the impression that it was going to be more touristy or, on some level, not the 'real' Nicaragua."

While in Tadanza, the group stayed in the home of a local farmer. A number of students stayed behind on the farm each day to assist the family in work around the house – tending to gardens, washing dishes, or assisting with meals. Senior Luke Badaczewski felt the interactions with community members were his most valuable experiences from the trip.

"The relationships I formed with community members – from the youngest, like Derby, to Don Gavino and Patrosiño – will be unforgettable," Badaczewski said. "Each community member was a model of love, selflessness, faith, and joy."

Walsh shared similar sentiments about her time in Nicaragua. "The best part about my experience was seeing people with so little be so content with their lives," Walsh said. "It opened my eyes to the beauty of living simply."

Badaczewski particularly bonded with the carpenters and masons at the job sites and with the flock of children around the farm.

"They were great examples on how to most fully live life and love others," Badaczewski said.

Other participants on the trip were Alycia Kime '14, Mary Roberts '14, C.J. Englert '14, Tonya Carlile '14, Sydney Maltese '14, Whitney Pinkston '15, Katie Transue '16 and student leaders Rachel Hartong '14 and Maggie Behlen '14. Bridges to Community honored the memory of Caitlin Yager '16, who also would have been a trip participant, with a plaque installed at the home-stay in Tadanza.

"I really enjoyed getting to know the other people that went," Bergene said. "The group that went couldn't have been better."

Saleem-Tanner explained that the trip was particularly special because the group included a range of travel experiences; some students had never left the country before, some had already been to other parts of Nicaragua.

"For all of us – no matter where we were coming from, whatever context we were com-

ing from – it was new," Saleem-Tanner said.

The experience was powerful for the participants, according to Saleem-Tanner, because it was a firsthand opportunity to connect local and global issues.

"There is something about being there, literally getting the dirt under your fingers, and walking in the mud and feeling the sun," Saleem-Tanner said. "You can't understand something the same way without being there, talking to people, seeing their faces, hearing their stories, eating their food."

The backs of the tie-dye t-shirts that the alternative winter break group made read "learn someone's story."

In pictures, in memories, in shared experiences, they as a group came to fully understand and value this self-designated trip motto.

"Every day was its own kind of adventure and its own kind of education," Saleem-Tanner said.

Lessons from Spain: ditching class is okay

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Much to our professors' dismay, college students have a bit of a tendency to skip class. Perhaps we decide that sleeping is more important than venturing out into the cold for that 8 a.m., or maybe we hit the library for a last-minute review for that impending exam. Either way, we all have different reasons for straying away from the classroom. But after spending almost a month studying abroad in Madrid, Spain, I am convinced that ditching class might be the best thing you ever do during your college career.

While the classroom is where we learn to critically think, change our perspectives, and write some rather impressive papers (Dr. Janet Bland, anyone?) it can only give us so much. Real knowledge comes from stepping outside of our

comfort zones and exploring the world. Studying abroad is one such way you can leap into the unknown.

Before I arrived in Spain, I thought I knew what I was getting myself into. After all, I had years of Spanish classes under my belt. But even so, none of those classes really prepared me for what I have found here. Living in Madrid has been one of the craziest and most wonderful experiences of my life. I get hopelessly lost, even when I have the exact directions right in front of me. I get funny stares from elderly women on the metro because I'm wearing bright, mismatched socks. I stumble over my words because, after all this time, I still can't remember how to conjugate a verb in a certain tense. Every day is a struggle, a memory made, and an adventure. And none of it would have been possible had



Photo courtesy of Eileen Walsh
Children from Tadanza pose with senior Tonya Carlile and sophomore Eileen Walsh after a day of working in the village.



Photo courtesy of Madison Moreno
Instead of going to class, junior Madison Moreno explores the historical streets of Spain. I opted to simply stick to the classroom.

So go ahead. Ditch the traditional educational experience and venture beyond the classrooms of MC. Volunteer in the local community, participate in an Alternative Break trip, or, my

personal favorite, study abroad. And while attending class is in fact important (I mean have you seen the cost of tuition, people?) don't forget that the best way to learn is to fearlessly get out there and see all the things this amazing world had to offer.