

In our volunteer's words

Magdalena Victoria (2010-2013)



"Two years ago I got the opportunity to participate in a community service trip in Managua, Nicaragua along with thirteen other students from various schools such as La Salle, Gulliver and Columbus. This past June was my second year going, and I have to say each year surpasses the previous.

We help out in a school called "Pan y Amor" in the Mercado Oriental area, one of the largest and most dangerous markets in Latin America. The aim of this trip was as simple as giving these kids the attention that they do not have anywhere else. Every day we planned different activities for the kids, such as arts and crafts, mathematical games, and one day was even reserved for a soccer tournament that we, the volunteers, participated in along with the students.

Personally, this experience was immensely life changing. Living in Key Biscayne is a huge privilege, everything is close by, everyone knows each other, and most importantly we are safe from any harm. Because we are so fortunate we tend to forget that there are millions of people in the world living in poverty, and this trip certainly opened my eyes to what these boys and girls were going through. What had the greatest effect on me was seeing the way these kids always seem so filled with joy, regardless of the devastating hardships they were going through. There was not one boy or girl who did not smile at you whenever you passed by, and they never forgot to say please and thank you. What they appreciated most from us was the individual care we provided each one of them with, which is the component they lack the most of at home. During recess, they would want to play soccer for hours with us, they wanted to be read stories, or they simply just wanted to tell us a joke. They kissed and hugged you with so much love that it may have seemed as if you have known them all your life, even though we were with them for only five days.

This trip opened my eyes to how important it is to be thankful for everything that we have been given? Little things such as having a home where we eat three times a day, having clean water to shower and a bed to sleep in. None of these children have these kinds of advantages that is why it was important for us to go on this trip, and show these kids that we appreciate them so much, because we did not change their lives in a span of five days, but they surely changed ours."

Iñigo Hernandez Ysasi (2010-2011)



"Some call it a third world country, others call it home, some even call it paradise but I just refer to it as, Nicaragua. This summer I was lucky enough to participate in the service trip for the second time. The year prior was incredible and I was able to experience things I had never experienced before. Within a week 14 of us became superstars in this school; the children ask for our autographs, pictures with us, bracelets and drawings were given to us by the dozens and our hugs were like gold to them. During that week we all truly feel like celebrities. The love that was returned to us is what made us truly feel special and worthwhile, it was a feeling we hope to reciprocate back to them. I cannot decide what year has been better because both have been so great that one cannot compare the two to make a final decision.

Someone as lucky as myself is never able to truly grasp what it is to live in poverty or to have to worry about luxuries we take for granted such as: clean clothes, showers, meals, or even if you will be lucky enough to survive another day. The children whom I was able to work with told me stories of horrific things that had occurred to them or others around them. One thing I am still unable to understand is how these kids who truly have nothing are able to come in everyday to school with a smile on their faces.

Some call it a third world country, others call it home, some even call it paradise but I just refer to it as, Nicaragua, the place which truly opened my eyes to how fortunate I am and the reason why I must take advantage of every opportunity presented to me."



“Back to reality...” I heard my friend say as the plane departed from Managua, Nicaragua, back home to Miami. Her words made me pause and reflect on my past week volunteering at “Escuela Pan y Amor,” a school for impoverished children and funded by the foundation we worked for, “Manos del Sur.” “What is reality?” I proceeded to ask myself, “Is it my safe home, excellent school, and fun-filled weekends at the beach? Or is it the torn-down houses and crammed school filled with the happiest children I have ever met?” Although what I experienced during that week in the slums of Nicaragua seemed far from my usual day-to-day life, the harsh conditions are what many families and children face as their reality. During the short plane ride back to Miami, memories from my unforgettable week dominated my mind.

When we arrived at the school that Monday, the children welcomed us with flashing smiles and open arms. Most of the families that I met live in homes that lack windows and have fractured walls. The more “fortunate” families consider themselves lucky if they have a ripped mattress thrown on the ground for sleeping. Nonetheless, they did not care what we looked like, what our parents did for a living, or how big our homes were. But they did care about us – immediately from the moment we arrived, they made it clear that they loved us because we cared. We cared enough to make a difference in their lives; we cared enough to make them feel special.

Each day we organized activities for the students to express themselves through art. As I walked around the crowded cafeteria and caught glimpses of their drawings, I was impressed by the effort and love they put into their artwork. I complimented a young boy, Alvaro, on his painting. Without hesitation, he handed me the canvas and said, “*Es para ti. Quédátelo para que te recuerdes de mí.*” “It’s for you. Keep it as a memory of me.” I had only seen him around the school for two days, yet he entrusted me with one of his most treasured possessions. Alvaro’s kindness and generosity left me speechless.

Over the course of the last day, several students handed me letters of thanks that expressed how much I meant to them. As I opened letters that translate as, “Thank you for the happiness you have given me” and “I love you a lot because you’re always with me,” feelings of gratitude and guilt overcame me simultaneously. I felt guilty for not appreciating every detail of my life, for complaining about the insignificant things I thought were important, and for lacking the everlasting joy these children demonstrated.

The words that the children wrote continue to remind me not only about how much we impacted their lives and made them feel special, but more importantly, of what they did for me. Their constant optimism, appreciation, happiness, perseverance, hope, and mental strength inspire me and have affected my life profoundly. What I had considered to be “reality” throughout my seventeen years of life suddenly seemed a foolish and ignorant perception. Without realizing it, I had previously defined “reality” by material possessions and living conditions. However, I found that reality is tinted by the way one sees and embraces the world, and by the attitude with which one approaches everyday obstacles – no matter how difficult they may be.

And as my friend turned to me on the airplane and sighed, “Back to reality...” I could not help but think how in one week the underprivileged children of “Escuela Pan y Amor” had drastically shifted my perception of reality. The lifestyle I was returning to was now richer in meaning: the week in Managua helped me put my life and values into perspective and become a more conscious and sympathetic individual.