

Maggie O'Shea '12

PUNTA GORDA, BELIZE



For my summer of service I went to Punta Gorda Belize and worked in San Marcos RC Primary School. My time spent volunteering in Belize is an experience that I will cherish forever. The time I spent in Belize taught me how to appreciate the little things in life such as friends and family. It taught me that you can make a difference in a person's life just by taking the time to sit down and listen. I wish I could say that the impact I made in Belize could compare to the impact Belize made on me. The lessons Kelly and I gave regarding health and science, although important, cannot compare to the life lessons the children taught us.

Our Belizian adventure got off to a shaky start when a mechanical issue with the plane delayed our flight from New York to Miami causing us to miss our connecting flight to Belize. After being set back a day, we finally arrived in Punta Gorda and we were fresh and ready to

begin our adventure. Ms. Dorla, our contact person in Belize, picked us up at the "airport" which was a dirt runway with a small building. We loaded our stuff into the pickup truck and she drove us to where we would be living.



We stayed with Ms. Elena (pictured right) who was a widow and in order to make money allowed American volunteers to live in her

house. Kelly and I each had our own room and she provided us with most meals. She was a wonderful host mom and it made our stay incredibly comfortable.

We hit the ground running, as the very next day Ms. Dorla's two workers, Mario and Mary, picked us up for a tour of Toledo and a meeting with the principal of the school where we would be teaching. We also had to visit the house of the Alcalde (the head of the village) as a sign of respect, the parents of the missing children in the village and the village health worker. At the school we met with principal Diane, the head of San Marcos primary school. We decided we would teach at the school Monday-Thursday. We would teach science and health and family living to all the grades pre-k through StdVI (8th grade) throughout each week. On Fridays we would go around with the health worker.



As time went on we were unable to get in touch with the health-worker so we decided to find something else to do on Fridays. On our tour the first day Mario had taken us to his high school, Julian Cho, to show us the school and introduce us to the science teacher Mr. Abdullah. Kelly and I decided to contact Mr. Abdullah to see if we could go to the high school on Fridays. However as it was the end of the school year

he asked us to work with the top three students who were about to graduate yet none of them had future plans. Kelly and I began to work with these students to apply them to the local university and begin to fill out a common application. By the time we left Belize we had successfully applied all three students (pictured left at their graduation from Julian Cho) to the University of Belize for the January semester to study nursing. We also agreed to help them by raising money to help pay for books and living. Kelly and I are continually trying to raise money to help these three students fulfill their dreams of



helping their own villages by being nurses.

It was an absolute joy to teach and work at San Marcos primary school. Our first few days at the school it was clear that we were foreigners observing and volunteering at their



Typical Mayan home in the village of San Marcos

school; but by the end of our time it was clear that we had been accepted into their school and their village. The students who were at first scared of us quickly warmed up to us and wanted to use our phones, cameras, iPods, and laptops. During breaks and lunch we enjoyed learning about their lives and by the end we got to know some of them very well. Some days throughout our stay we would bring water balloons to play with the kids. At first they were too scared to hit me and Kelly but by the last day it was me and Kelly versus all the students!

We taught 3-4 classes of science or health a day. The most important things we taught them were nutrition and hygiene which was an obvious problem in the village. Many of the children were undernourished as they were fed mostly corn tortilla and fruit with the occasional meal of rice and beans. In science class we introduced all the students to the scientific method. The students had never conducted their own science experiment so Kelly and I decided to have a mini “science fair”. We created an experiment for each grade from pendulums (right),



electromagnets (left), electricity, solutions and acids and bases. We conducted the experiment with them and helped them to make a poster board illustrating the scientific method. Then one day each class demonstrated to the school their experiment and their poster. When we were conducting the electricity experiment the class teacher said “oh I taught them electricity they didn’t pay attention”. However when we let the kids build their own circuits with Christmas lights, wire and batteries, their eyes lit up with discovery. We left behind the posters and materials in hopes that the teachers will be able to replicate our

science fair in years to come.





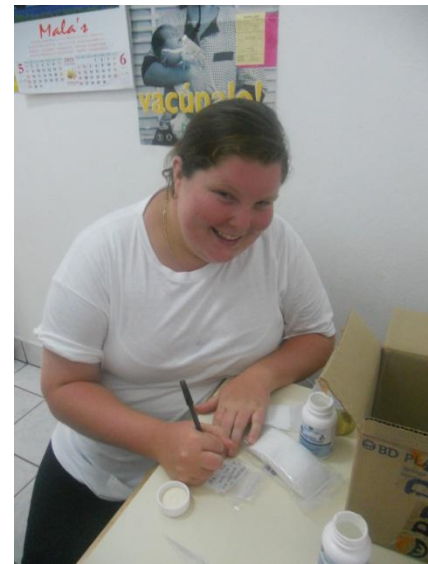
Me, Kelly, Santiago and Marvin in the Tie-Dye shirts we made with the graduating class



Students in STDVI at their graduation singing "Lean on Me"

Kelly and I ended up spending a lot of time with the students of STDVI who were graduating. The principal doubles as the teacher of STDVI therefore her class needed us the most. We ended up preparing them for graduation by teaching them their song "Lean on Me" and decorating the church with them. These students we ended up getting to know very well and we developed a strong bond with many of the students. Kelly and I even delivered a speech to them at their graduation. Although we only spent about 5 weeks with the students we had made a mutual impact on each other. This became clear to me when upon returning home I received a message from one of the students reading "Miss you have done so much for us in our graduating year of 2011 we will never forget you."

During our stay in Belize we were also afforded the opportunity to spend three days working at a health clinic in the village of big falls. The clinic consisted of one doctor, one nurse, one pharmacist and then two traveling nurses. We were able to help by weighing the patients, bringing charts to the doctor and, during the down time, count and package medications. It was interesting to see the inner workings of their health system which was very efficiently run.



Having the opportunity to spend six weeks in Belize, living among the locals and working in the Mayan village, was a gift. I woke up each day very hot and sweaty, but eager to experience something new. I am truly grateful for the time I spent in the beautiful country of Belize.

