

Kelly Werner '12

## Punta Gorda, Belize

For six weeks during the months of May and June 2011, my friend Maggie O'Shea and I had the great opportunity to teach the last month of school for primary students in a small Mayan village outside Punta Gorda, Belize. In the coastal "P.G. Town," as the locals call it, we lived in a quaint, comfortable home with our host mother, Miss Elena Pate, and two other American volunteers. Because we lived in such a small town, it wasn't long before everyone knew our names when we walked down the street. They welcomed us into the community with open arms and made us feel safe. During my six weeks in Belize, I felt full of life; the happiness and selflessness of those around me was contagious. Many of my kids didn't have anything to eat for lunch, but when they did, they were eager to make me try some. They knew their foods were foreign to me and they were proud to share their culture. Running around barefoot with them playing soccer helped me see the world through the eyes of a child again. I was not only humbled, but envious of their delicate innocence and how they lived so contently even though they had so little. My kids in Belize will always hold a special place in my heart for all they have given me and I hope to return at my first opportunity.



San Marcos R.C. School was located in San Marcos village, ten miles outside Punta Gorda. This is the home of one of my students, Zoila Bolon. The Mayan homes are usually one large room covered by a traditional thatched roof.



When the heat became overwhelming, I often went swimming off the dock located a few blocks from our home. I enjoyed living in a town where I could walk or bike anywhere I wanted to go.



The Mayan people speak a local dialect called Ketchi, but English is the language spoken in schools. Here, I am teaching the pre-school children some new English words about transportation.



After an hour bus ride from Punta Gorda every morning, Maggie and I walked a mile on a dirt road to get to the school in San Marcos Village. After they became acquainted with us, the kids loved to walk us home and take turns getting piggy-back rides.



Before school started, I loved to play hide-and-seek or duck-duck-goose with the five-year olds in one of my Standard I class.



On the first day of the rainy season, we didn't let a little flood get in the way of our soccer game.



During the last week of the school year, we helped the Standard VI class prepare for their graduation from primary school and entry into high school. We introduced them to tie-dye and helped each student make their own graduation shirt.



In addition to teaching science classes in the primary school, Maggie and I took a few trips to the local high school to talk about pursuing careers in the sciences. The top three students at Julian Cho High School dreamed of becoming nurses, but could not afford to apply to the University of Belize. We helped them complete their college and scholarship applications, and all three of them received full academic scholarships. When we got home, Maggie and I fundraised enough money for their room and board so that they may begin classes in January 2012. Francisco, Elsa and Gladis stand proudly at their graduation!