

Jillian Gasiewicz, '07
Chiapas, Mexico

San Cristóbal de las Casas



Cat, Andy and I posing with our wonderful hosts, the Millán family. Virginia is originally from Ohio and moved down to Chiapas to be with her husband, Francisco, who is not pictured. During our stay we met three of their four children; Johnny, Molly and Phil. Polita, their maid, was more of an aunt to them than someone who worked for them. She made us so many wonderful meals, anywhere from traditional Mexican dishes like soups, tostadas and empanadas, to her rendition of a hamburger!

For our Summer of Service, Cat, Andy and I led a “pioneer” adventure to the city known as San Cristóbal de las Casas, in the Mexico’s poorest state, Chiapas. We worked hard throughout the spring semester to finally gain a contact with one local priest, Padre Alfonso. He helped organize tentative plans to volunteer at the regional hospital and gained us contact with a family from his congregation, who offered to act as our “host family”, and provide us a place to stay. I remember getting off the plane that day in May, in the city Tuxtla Gutierrez, about two hours away from San Cristóbal. We had arranged through Padre Alfonso to meet a man named Manuel, who drove us the hour and a half commute through the curvy mountain roads, with all four of us crammed in the front seat of his Toyota pick-up truck, Cat on Andy’s lap and my legs constantly getting in the way of the stick shift. All of our stomachs were in nervous knots as we glanced out the window of our sardine box of a truck; we knew our next challenge would be finding our

host family's home in the approaching city that we had no idea about. Manuel was a lifesaver, for he drove us right to the Millán family door, and even spoke with their maid to help us get in. Virginia, the woman who had emailed us those two days ago, was unfortunately not there! As I look back on these first few hours in Tuxtla and San Cristóbal, I can honestly say I've never been so nervous or, as Andy put it, as "out of my comfort zone" as then. Yet as soon as Virginia came through the door, these feelings disappeared. She was the most generous, welcoming, friendly woman I have ever met. That day, she eased our apprehensions, welcoming us with a meal, conversation, stories about the city, her life and her family and answers to our many questions. After the meal, she led us into the family room and proceeded to play her guitar and sing songs for us, skipping over that awkward small talk you usually experience when you first meet someone, and jumping right into a relationship that felt as if we had been friends for years. The Millán family provided us with so many things throughout our next six weeks in San Cristóbal; we rented their aunt's house down the street and ate lunch with them everyday, during which we were able to ask more questions and gain knowledge about the area, its volunteer and entertainment opportunities, the "do's and don'ts", etc. The Millán's showed us the market where we would buy food, brought us to our initial contact, Padre Alfonso, introduced us to friends of their church and workplace, and took us on trips to nearby caves and Mayan Ruins. This family and their genuine generosity and welcoming character meant more than I can describe. I wrote it throughout my journal, that one of the things I wanted to bring back with me and try to embody in my personality and actions were these characteristics, for I personally felt their effects and impact.



Our friends Nolberto and Romeo, who we met while they were just opening their school, Sol Maya. We developed a close friendship with these guys, helping them by clean, build classrooms and eventually teach English two nights a week.



After a few days of settling in, we set out to the regional hospital, where we had instructions from the director to simply show up whenever we got there, and he would find work for us. We only had to spend a total of 2 hours in the pediatric ward, shadowing doctors as they did their morning rounds, to realize that we could have little impact at this hospital, with many available doctors and nurses, and our language barrier. Although we were a little disappointed and lost in what to do next, we went to the nearest Internet café to search for something else. Again, we had a tremendous amount of luck within a few hours, and found a nursing home at which we could volunteer. Each day we would walk the half hour to get to the "Asilo de Senilla", where we would spend 6 hours with its nineteen residents. The nursing home only had one nurse at a time on duty, so we were an extreme help in bathing, exercising, feeding and entertaining them. They were grateful for our company and friendship, as were we.



*Top: Out on the patio on a sunny day with María, Ana and Amalia
Bottom: Felipe and Calletano coloring at the table.*



*Left: Amalia and I doing her daily marching exercises.
Right: Mauricio, who would always be laughing so hard his teeth would pop out.*

We established close relationships within no time, and looked forward to coming back each and every day. There was Don Federico, who was once a cowboy, but now experiencing back pain from a bad fall he had. I could sit and listen to Don Federico's stories all day long, as we colored pictures of horses and deer, sewed two stuffed animals and took walks around the grounds together. Don Santiago and Doña Flor were epileptic siblings who accompanied each other everywhere. They showed me how we can provide someone else strength, even while experiencing difficulties ourselves. Doña Amalia taught me perseverance, for although she was blind, she continued her daily tasks of laundry and helping set the table. At times it was hard hearing the sad stories and disadvantages of some of the people; Ana, a young woman in her thirties had two children in another city, and was confined to the nursing home and a wheelchair due to her arthritis; María worked hard her entire life, and never met a man to love or marry. These two women experienced no mental difficulties, which I imagined was difficult on their spirit, when all of their other companions did. All of this taught me the need for patience, compassion, gratitude and optimism. And by the time we said our tearful goodbye, I had learned the true value of friendship, its give-and-take nature and selfless desire in which you wish only happiness, love and enjoyment for the other person, and how you can find it in someone despite your differences.



*Top Left: Overview of the city of San Cristóbal
Top Right: A fruit stand in a local market
Bottom: Three indigenous women walking along the Andador street.*





*Top Left: A shop along the street
Top Right: Cat and I in front of the cathedral
Bottom: Cat and Andy interacting with local children*

In summary, my six weeks in Chiapas really taught me to value some of the things I take for granted in my life: not only my material resources, but also the people, education, and endless amount of opportunity I have. I also witnessed genuine generosity, friendship and welcome, something that I found to be ironically disproportionate in comparison to home, where we have so much more to offer, yet fail to do so. I've brought back these lessons, and have truly changed because of this trip. I want to convey my gratitude and honor to Siena College and the Albany Medical Program for this opportunity, as well as my wishes for all of its other participants: that you appreciate this life altering experience as much as I have, if not more.



Federico and I, who told me "Eres una paloma blanca", which means "You are a white dove."



Santiago and I walking outside on the patio.