

Jeannine Miranne, '04
Oaxaca, Mexico

I have always recognized and valued the call to serve others. My parents and my Catholic faith and education instilled the value of service in me at a young age. During my grammar school and high school years, I was involved in a wide array of volunteer activities, ranging from organizing food drives to tutoring to raising money for cancer patients. At my high school graduation from Sacred Heart Academy in Hempstead, NY, I was asked to compose and deliver the valedictory address. In my address, I quoted Ralph Waldo Emerson, the nineteenth century American transcendentalist writer, whose words spoke to my heart. I exhorted the Class of 2000 to heed Emerson's advice to "leave the world a bit better" and reminded them that true success involves knowing "even one life has breathed easier because you have lived." For me, Emerson's words epitomized the call to service. The path of service was one I planned to continue traveling in college. I was fortunate enough to be selected into the joint admissions program of Siena College and Albany Medical College, which has a "human service focus."

My Siena experience, especially my summer of service, has left an indelible mark on my life. During the summer of 2003, I spent June and July in Oaxaca, Mexico with my classmate and friend Sudha Koganti. After studying abroad in Salamanca, Spain, I wanted to use my knowledge of Spanish to help me serve others. For this reason, I chose to complete my summer of service in Mexico.

Oaxaca, the capital of the State of Oaxaca, is located in southeastern Mexico. A culturally rich and diverse city, Oaxaca is known for its "artesanía," or crafts and handiwork, "el árbol de Tule," the oldest tree in the world, and the ancient Zapotec ruins of Monte Alban. The city's center is situated in the valley of the Sierra Madre mountain range. Sudha and I lived at a volunteer home in the barrio of Santa Rosa, situated on one of the mountains. Mary-Lou Doran, a coordinator of the Maryknoll lay missionary program, ran the volunteer home and took great care of us.





Sudha and I spent our mornings working at a medical clinic servicing the poor and our afternoons working with Mexican children. Dr. Fernando Badillo, an indigenous doctor, and Sister Moira, a Maryknoll sister and licensed practicing nurse, ran the medical clinic.





During our first week at the clinic, we performed a plethora of tasks, ranging from cleaning the clinic facilities including a new clinic under construction, to sorting medicines and assisting Dr. Fernando treat various walk-in patients. It was amazing to see firsthand how the lack of medical supplies, equipment, and medicine impedes the treatment of even the most minor illnesses. Sudha and I also had the opportunity to accompany Dr. Fernando when he made home visits to patients.

After our first week, Dr. Fernando asked Sudha and myself to visit and care for one of these homebound patients, Señora Isabel, who lived about fifteen minutes from the clinic, up in the mountains. Señora Isabel was about eighty years old and had vaginal cancer. She was bedridden and lived in a one-room home on the same plot of land as her niece and her niece's large family.

Sudha and I visited Señora Isabel everyday. We cleaned her room and living space and bathed her every other day. We braided her hair, cut and painted her nails, and attempted to do crude physical therapy exercises to try to make it easier for her to walk. But perhaps the most important thing that we did was listen to and care for Señora Isabel. Señora Isabel's health seemed better on some days than others. She was able to garner enough strength to walk small distances with the aid of a walking stick. Caring for and building a relationship with Señora Isabel, a woman from a different culture and generation, was truly one of the most fulfilling experiences of my life.



Sudha and I had a break from our duties as nurses' assistants during the afternoons when we worked with Mexican children. Andrea, one of the young women with whom we worked, had Down syndrome's disease. Santos, a young man our own age, was physically challenged. Sudha and I played with Andrea and her niece Milka and the children who lived on Santos' block. Games such as frisbee and soccer, and arts and crafts activities, were examples of how we shared with and related to them. The last two weeks of our trip, I taught English to some of the girls at the request of their mothers. Sudha and I did not think of our "work" with the Mexican children as such, but rather as recreation. We even became friends with Diana, one of the

girls who lived on Santos' block, who invited us to her graduation from "preparatoria." We still keep in touch.





Oaxaca is such a culturally rich city. The center of the city, "el centro historico," has become an international tourist attraction. But stepping outside of the historic center, one encounters the harsh reality of poverty. Even so, there is such a potential for beauty. Sudha and I fell in love with the city and its people and decided to extend our stay in Oaxaca to seven rather than six weeks.

My summer of service has been a watershed event in my life. My eyes have been truly opened to the reality of poverty and its effect on people. I have learned to look past poverty and cultural differences, to see people for who they truly are. I have met many inspirational people in Oaxaca who I will carry in my heart and mind forever: Mary-Lou Doran, the Maryknoll sisters, Dr. Fernando, the other Maryknoll volunteers staying at the volunteer home, Señora Isabel, Andrea and Milka, Santos, Diana, and all the other children I worked with.

Four weeks after we left Oaxaca, Sudha and I learned that Señora Isabel had passed away. Perhaps, Sudha and I helped Señora Isabel "breathe more easily" in her final days. As I pursue my career in medicine, I will continue to hold firmly to the thought that each of us can "leave the world a bit better" in some way. I hope to return to Oaxaca and to volunteer my services as a physician.