

Gary DeRusso '11

San Marcos, Nicaragua

For the last few years, I knew the summer of 2010 was going to hold a special significance apart from the rest. Indeed, it was the summer that I would embark on the Summer of Service, a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity to live out the core tenet of the Siena/Albany Medical College Program: Service to others. I had always held an enthusiastic, almost idyllic vision of these six weeks, excited to visit a third-world country where the need is certainly dire and make an impact. The six weeks that Charlotte and I spent in San Marcos, Nicaragua were definitely unforgettable, as we got to do our part in helping others, but reciprocally also learn about ourselves and service as a whole.



San Marcos is a small, unassuming town in Nicaragua, but it did have a full-fledged university, Ave Maria University, which essentially is the Latin American campus of the Florida school of the same name. Above is an intersection near the central park of the town. This street in particular was generally bustling since it featured street vendors selling their wares (mostly food.)



The aforementioned central park in San Marcos.

During our trip, Charlotte and I wanted to partake in both medical and non-medical-related service work for several reasons. We realized that we are simply limited in our skills as pre-medical students, and that we could help in other ways...plus it provided some variety in our everyday work. As such, we helped out in the local health clinic and at a daycare for young children.



This is the *Centro de Salud* of San Marcos. There were usually always patients here for a plethora of different reasons, varying in severity and specialty. We worked mostly with Lorena, who worked in what could be considered an emergency room of sorts. During our time at the clinic, we were fortunate enough to be allowed to do plenty of hands-on care for the patients, including taking tons of temperatures and blood pressures, providing inoculations, and, at one point, even cleaning wounds and removing stitches.



Unbelievably, we were allowed to do injections at the clinic, something that simply would not have happened in the U.S. Don't worry: Although the patient looks worried, the injection went quite smoothly.



Lorena and I in the room where we typically worked. Lorena was nothing short of amazing to us, acclimating us into the clinic, getting us involved and teaching us along the way.



For our non-medical work, Charlotte and I worked in *El Centro de Desarrollo Infantil* (CDI), which is where parents could drop off their children during the day. The kids ranged from newborns and infants up to about five-year-olds. Needless to say, the kids were adorable, energetic and inquisitive.

During a typical day at the CDI, the children would partake in typical activities, like sing songs, color and draw, play with blocks and clay, and go outside for recess. We not only helped the teachers out with the various tasks, we basically got to become kids again, joining the kids in these activities and having a ball with them. It was a joy to be able to work with these kids and to make one smile or laugh had the power to make your day.



The kids were understandably hesitant to try the monkey bars on the small playground, but I was able to let them experience it by holding them and letting them do it. Needless to say, once I helped one of them, everyone else circled around wanting to go up, too! It seemed like every kid really loved it, and you could see the joy on their faces.



The closest thing we got to a “class picture” with the classroom we were with most often. While the kids were fascinated with the camera, they were also very energetic, making it quite difficult to get them all in the picture at any given time!

During one week in San Marcos, we were lucky enough to help out with a missionary group from Florida, WE-GO. Each day involved piling into a pick-up truck with our supplies and driving to very remote areas of Nicaragua. We would set up in small buildings and the local residents were able to line up, talk to the Nicaraguan doctor that assisted us, and then we basically administered prescriptions. However, the prescriptions were not like in the U.S.; they were things we might take for granted here, like acetaminophen, ibuprofen, and multivitamins. Even these things were difficult to come by, so we were able to give them to those truly in need. Miraculously, we saw at least 100 families per day, allowing us to make an impact in these isolated towns.



Setting up one day in a small, empty classroom. The doctor (with the mask) would converse with the families, write out a prescription, and we would help fill it for them.

These are but mere summations of the major things we were able to do during our time in Nicaragua. The little everyday events and stories all added up to truly make an unforgettable Summer of Service experience. We certainly felt like we did what we could realistically do while there, both with our time and with donations of things that both the clinic and daycare really needed. As always with service, there was that indescribably great feeling of selflessly helping others that we experienced.

However, we realized other things, as well. For instance, we quickly came to terms with our limitations. We would have loved to have done more, whether it be medically, financially or time-wise. At first it was a frustrating feeling, because the eye-opening need of the city and the people was always surrounding us. However, there was a silver lining of sorts in that it was just further motivation to stay focused so that one day, we may return as qualified doctors and make an even bigger impact. As such, the Summer of Service reinforced our already engrained desires to be physicians dedicated to helping others, plain and simple. We got a taste of helping others in serious need, and that only left us wanting more.

On top of this, I felt like I came away from the trip changed quite a bit. There are plenty of words to encapsulate the experience, but “humbling” does an admirable job doing just that. We are all extremely fortunate to live in the U.S. and lead the lives that we do. Sure, we *hear* about third-world countries like Nicaragua, but it typically ends there. There is no replacement for actually *going* and *experiencing* it firsthand. I came

home a more grateful, grounded individual, as well as more patient (the language “barrier” took a lot of patience on my part to get adjust to; it can be frustrating not understanding everything or being able to explain yourself.)

I have said quite a bit about my Summer of Service, and I know I could continue on and on. I figured I would conclude, despite the nagging suspicion of cliché, with someone else’s words to help me wrap this up:

“The best way to find yourself is to lose yourself in the service of others.” – Mohandas Gandhi

“Teach this triple truth to all: A generous heart, kind speech, and a life of service and compassion are the things which renew humanity.” - Buddha