

Mary Paul, '05
Trinidad/Tobago

I spent this past summer working in Trinidad with the Missionaries of Charity (MC). It was one of the greatest experiences of my life, and I will always look back to it with fond memories. I was feeling a combination of nervousness and excitement before we left because I had never been away from home for that long by myself before, and the knowledge that I would be doing just that for six weeks in a foreign country both thrilled and scared me. In the end, it turned out I really had nothing to be worried about.

We landed in Trinidad on July 6, 2004 at about 8 PM. Two of the sisters met us at the airport with one of their volunteers who had come to drive us to our home. It turned out to be quite an adventure because the driver, Jerome, had a very small car and we had to fit six people in there along with three large suitcases and another three smaller ones. Somehow we all managed to squeeze ourselves in there by contorting our bodies into very odd positions. The entire situation was so ridiculous that we laughed the whole way home. It was definitely an experience to remember and a great way to break the ice!

That night we met Granny, the woman we were going to live with, and her son, who we ended up simply calling "Uncle" out of respect. It was a little intimidating at first, being in a strange new house with people we had never met, but they made us feel right at home. Granny was a very traditional and religious woman, but she took such good care of us that we barely had time to ever miss home. She treated us like her own grandchildren, so we never had to worry about anything.



Joanny, Erica & me with the MC sisters.

For the first three weeks that we were there, the sisters arranged for us to work at a school called RC Success that was right across the street from their home. We were teachers for the summer camp being run there for children ranging from age four to ten. There were about four other volunteers that worked there too, and together, we helped the kids with their reading and writing in the mornings, and in the afternoons we played with them, organizing games outside in the courtyard, or playing board games inside when it rained. It was a wonderful experience, working everyday with those kids, watching as many of them slowly improved on their reading and writing. We saw kids that refused to even pick up a book on the first day come to us with enthusiasm by the end, begging us to read with them. We had so much fun, and it was such a joy to walk in every morning and have about ten kids ambush us with hugs, smiles, and excited chatter. Three weeks went by pretty quickly though, and before we knew it, summer school came to an end.



The Kids & me at RC Success School.

Luckily for us, one of the other volunteers at the school, Charlene, told us about this volunteer project opportunity in Tobago with the Eston Study Center in Port-of-Spain. Together with about eight other girls, we went to Tobago and put together a free summer camp for children in the village of Bon Accord that were too poor to afford to go to a real camp. We were in Tobago for one week, and it was wonderful! It is a gorgeous island, and luckily we had plenty of opportunities to take advantage of the beaches there!



Baby Isaiah & me at the Summer Camp in Tobago.

We ran the summer camp for three days. On the first day we helped the kids make puppets for a puppet show they were to perform on the last day. The second day was spent making piñatas, practicing the plays, and playing outside. On the last day, the boys and girls performed their plays and we had a party with the kids breaking their piñatas for lots of goodies. Again, it was so nice to see the kids come in each morning with big smiles on their faces, eager to see what we had planned for them next. Working with the kids at this camp and at the summer school helped us to learn so much about Trini culture. They were so eager to teach us about their country, so we spent many days learning how to dance and speak with Trini accents (though we were largely unsuccessful in that endeavor!).



Daniella & me at Puppt Show Practice.

The last two weeks that we were in Trinidad we worked with the MC sisters full-time. There were eight children living with them, all of whom were mentally and physically handicapped in some way. In addition there were five "grannies" that also lived there. Basically, we helped feed the kids, wash and fold laundry, sweep and mop the floors, and pack food for the sisters to distribute to the local people.



The Residents of the MC House & me.

Seeing all that the sisters did and how much they sacrificed was truly an eye-opening experience. They live simply to serve others, which is a major sacrifice to make. Being around those children everyday truly made me realize how much I take for granted. Behind their little faces, each child had a story to tell, one that was usually sad and tragic. One experience that sticks out in my mind over all the others occurred the first day that we went to the MC house. We were going around, meeting all the people that lived there, and trying to talk to them, even though most of the children could not speak. I was standing near a little girl named Celian, who was blind in both eyes, and talking to her. We were getting ready to leave so I playfully stroked her cheeks and ear and told her I would see her tomorrow and then turned to leave. This child, who could not even see what I looked like, grabbed my hand and slowly brought it back to her ear, silently pleading with me to touch her again. I remember standing there, looking down at her as tears came to my eyes. This sweet innocent child who had been dealt a pretty poor hand in life, longed for human touch just like the rest of us do. She wanted to be held and cared for, even though she could not communicate those needs out loud. It just hit me like a ton of bricks, all that I had been taking for granted throughout my life. I never had to worry about anything, never suffered from a lack of love or affection.



Celian lying in bed.

These kids, who were almost all younger than me, had probably experienced more sadness and tragedy in their short lives than I ever would. I realized then that this is what the summer of service was all about: learning that there are so many different kinds of people out there, some who are better off, but many who are worse off than you. It takes special people like the sisters to devote their lives to helping children like the ones that lived with them. These children, who are utterly dependent on the charity of others, could not be with more compassionate and caring people than the sisters.

I wish there was a way I could sum up my entire experience in a nutshell, but I cannot because my experiences in Trinidad were so varied and special for a number of different reasons. One thing is for certain though: it was the most memorable trip I have ever taken, and hopefully someday I will be able to go back!