

**Sacred Heart University**

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**From the Selected Works of Bronwyn Cross-Denny, Ph.D., LCSW**

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## Students Spend Spring Break Volunteering in South America and the U.S.

Bronwyn Cross-Denny



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News Story: March 17, 2017



More than 50 Sacred Heart University students, faculty and staff traded in a week of vacation for a week of volunteering in South America with human aid organizations and stateside with Habitat for Humanity.

During spring break, the Office of Volunteer Programs and Service Learning coordinated international service programs to Colombia, Guatemala, Costa Rica and Nicaragua. Four faculty, 49 students and two staff members participated. Each trip was distinct, both in service and cultural immersion, said Matthew Kaye, director of Volunteer Programs and Service Learning.

Students who went to Costa Rica worked side-by-side with six students and one professor from the Tecnológico de Costa Rica (the Costa Rican Institute of Technology) to help local schools and develop the community. The group that went to Guatemala partnered with CERNE, a local organization that operates a one-room elementary school and a clinic, to work with children on educational activities and help install eco-friendly stoves. In Columbia, SHU students partnered with the Rise and Walk Foundation, helping with afterschool enrichment programs and taking youth on a retreat. In Nicaragua, students worked with Viva Nicaragua on a variety of community development projects.

Geissy Bitencourt, a graduate assistant in the Office of Volunteer Programs & Service Learning and the Office of Campus Ministry, was in Costa Rica with Kaye and eight SHU undergraduate students. They stayed in the town of Turrialba, working at three elementary schools on a variety of tasks, including painting, gardening and teaching English and computers to the children.

"I decided to volunteer on spring break because I went to Guatemala last year and absolutely loved it," Bitencourt said. "The people in the community, working with children and learning about the culture, encouraged me to keep visiting new places and assist different communities."

The trip exceeded all of Bitencourt's expectations. "I left the country with several new friendships, a deeper understanding of the culture and a new love for embracing the country's slogan, 'pura vida,' which translates to 'pure life.' I learned a lot about the group of students I was with and the children we played soccer with, and I even learned new things about myself. We were able to help the community we worked with by stepping out of our comfort zones and facing challenges, such as translating words in Spanish," she said.

In Granada, Nicaragua, Bronwyn Cross-Denny, a social work professor and director of the master's in social work program, and 17 students worked at three sites. Two groups worked with children at community centers, and another group worked with seniors at a retirement home. Students stayed with host families during the trip, Cross-Denny said. "There were numerous benefits of the trip, including developing an understanding of a different culture through immersion, socio-political and historical contexts, social justice issues, privilege and the needs of developing countries and learning Spanish."

#### **Nicaragua group reaches out to at-risk children**

Sophomore Laura James of Long Island, N.Y., a 20-year-old psychology major who is minoring in sociology, said she decided to spend spring break volunteering abroad because she was inspired by her sister, Mia, a SHU alumna, who participated in service work in El Salvador and Guatemala. "I've also never been out of the United States, but enjoy taking part in community service, so this trip was a perfect opportunity for me to experience something new while doing something I love," she said.

While in Nicaragua, James worked in a program called Adelita that focuses on providing positive environments for children from at-risk communities. "The job was to add to the positive environment by talking and playing with kids after school. We talked about hygiene, self-esteem and bullying in school. With those talks, we had activities that corresponded with each topic. We were very much focused on having these kids smile as much as possible while we were there."

James said the experience and interacting with the children opened her eyes. It taught her what it means to be patient and kind, and to care about people around her, she said. "I had no idea what I was getting myself into with the trip, but I am so glad I did. Those kids taught me that a smile is the most powerful force in the world," said James.

Junior Adilene Garcia of Wallingford, 21, a social work major who is minoring in human rights and social justice, also went to Nicaragua. "I decided to spend my spring break volunteering abroad because of the incredible experience and the new perspective. I knew going on this trip would tap into a lot of the things I'm currently learning about," she said.

Garcia worked with women at Asilo De Ancianos La Providencia, a retirement home in Nicaragua. They made cards for International Women's Day, painted the women's nails, sang songs, danced, discussed their favorite dishes and overall were companions to the women, many of whom were neglected by their families. Garcia worked as a translator between the worksite group and the head volunteer at the home.

"We learned so much from everyone just by listening," Garcia said. "I know I will take what I learned from this experience and reflect on it for the rest of my life." Coming home, Garcia said she felt different in a positive way. "This trip confirmed to me that I am in the right field, and it empowered me to become an advocate for those who have a lot to say but are often overlooked."

#### **Four groups help build homes in the U.S.**

Another four groups of students worked in the United States with Habitat for Humanity to help build homes for the less fortunate in Michigan, North Carolina, Iowa and California.

Students in California were in the small town of Weed, near Mt. Shasta and close to California's northern border. A few years ago, a fire burned 153 homes and other buildings in Weed, including a Habitat office and warehouse. The SHU group helped build a home for a family who lost theirs, laying down hardwood floors, digging water line trenches and painting. Others worked in a donated house 30 miles away, rewiring electrical lighting and plastering sheet rock walls.

In Des Moines, Iowa, graduate student Jillian Gray, 23, volunteered and advised SHU undergraduates who were working with a Habitat for Humanity affiliate. Like Geissy, Gray is also a graduate assistant in the Office of Volunteer Programs & Service Learning.

"One of the main reasons I chose SHU for my undergraduate career, and continued my education here for my master's degree, is because of SHU's ability to challenge its students," Gray said. "I was once told by a close friend of mine that life begins outside of your comfort zone, and ever since that day, I have challenged myself to get comfortable with being uncomfortable. During my undergraduate career, I was given the opportunity to go on three Habitat for Humanity Collegiate Challenge trips. Since starting my master's degree, advising a Habitat trip seemed like a natural progression."

Gray said her group mainly worked on a home restoration project. "What I find amazing about these trips is the group's ability to help you find a new confidence in yourself," she said.