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CHP Teams Up with Simply Smiles for Mission Trip

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Exercise science students from the College of Health Professions and one student from the John F. Welch College of Business spent this past spring break on a mission trip to Oaxaca, Mexico. This was a pilot trip initiated by Valerie Wherley, an exercise science professor at the University, to determine whether or not Oaxaca would be a good fit for service learning for the exercise science program.

For this mission trip, the College of Health Professions teamed up with the organization, Simply Smiles, which has ongoing projects in Oaxaca. Simply Smiles is an organization that is dedicated to building bright futures while improving the daily lives of impoverished children. One student they are sponsoring is Gabriela Chavez Hernandez, a business student at SHU who is originally from the Oaxaca area but is currently living in Southport. Chavez Hernandez introduced the University to the Simply Smiles organization with the help of a few others.

“Professor Scott Aliberti first brought Simply Smiles to the attention of Matthew Kaye, director of volunteer programs and service learning,” said Chavez Hernandez. “Kaye then introduced Simply Smiles to the College of Health Professions, because they were looking for a new place to go on service trips. I was very excited and hoped that the University would go to Oaxaca. Having the opportunity to bring my University to Oaxaca meant so much to me.”

Chavez Hernandez has been involved with Simply Smiles since it’s founding back in 2003. She was living in its inaugural project—Casa Hogar Children’s home, based in Oaxaca City—when Bryan Nurnberger founded the organization. Chavez Hernandez was at the children’s home not because she was an orphan, but because in her small village three hours away, education ended after the sixth grade. Her parents decided to send her to Casa Hogar to continue her studies. When Chavez Hernandez graduated from high school in 2007, she began looking for colleges in Oaxaca City, but Simply Smiles offered her the opportunity to come to the United States, and she became a student at Sacred Heart University in the fall of 2013.

“Sacred Heart has a very strong dedication to helping communities, and when I learned that there were groups going to other countries, I thought that the University and Simply Smiles could work together to achieve the goals that Simply Smiles has set for our Oaxaca community,” said Chavez Hernandez. “The work is hard, and Simply Smiles needs more people who can work side
by side to provide better opportunities to the community. Most importantly, we need people who can help us to keep creating new smiles and new dreams and keep changing so many lives.”

The students who took part in this service learning trip participated in various activities that included providing and serving meals to orphans in Oaxaca; visiting the families who live at the Oaxaca dump, taking them on an excursion to the park and providing them with a meal; doing some building work at a middle school in the Zapotec village of Santa María Tepexipana; providing and serving a meal to all school children in the Zapotec village and organizing and distributing food to approximately 800 people in the surrounding villages of Santa María Tepexipana.

“My favorite part of the mission trip was visiting the Casa Hogar Children’s Home,” said junior Lauren Fox, an exercise science student from Bridgewater, Mass. “The children of Casa Hogar displayed a unique sense of hope and resilience for change in the future. I view Casa Hogar as the place where my overall outlook on life was changed forever. I met so many inspiring individuals—not only in Casa Hogar, but in Oaxaca City as a whole. The people of Oaxaca are the strongest individuals I have ever encountered, and I am so thankful for the impact that each of them made on my life. A piece of my heart will always be with the inspiring individuals of Oaxaca.”

“Ever since I was admitted to Sacred Heart University, I felt lucky and proud,” said Chavez Hernandez. “After this trip to Oaxaca, I feel even more fortunate to be a SHU student, because this trip has given me the chance to see and believe that there are still people out there who want to make the world a better place. I am so grateful to the director of volunteer programs, to the College of Health Professions, to our advisor, Christina Gunther, and to the students—Michelle Henault, Lauren Fox, Allison Coll and Jamie O’Donoghue—who gave up their spring break to make this trip possible. They all have helped me show and to reaffirm the dedication that Simply Smiles has to the hundreds of children, adults and families in Oaxaca.”