There’s a poverty of material things but there’s not a poverty of spirit.

— Mary Jane Lipinski

St. Michael’s students bring help to El Salvador

By Gary Jeanneauve
Staff Writer

There’s no better feeling than helping someone in need, except maybe doing it in a tropical country. A group of five St. Michael’s students, did just that, and fulfilled long-time personal dreams by immersing themselves in Latin American culture during their Mobilization of Volunteer Efforts service trip to El Salvador in March.

Sophomore Kristin Beaton, Craig Duffy, Christopher Higgins, Kaitlyn McKieran and junior Alexa Battler Hadden accompanied by Spanish professor Mary Jane Lipinski and a licensed practical nurse Tracy Tyler-O’Reilly had many reasons for wanting to volunteer their time.

“I am very into service work, and as a Spanish major it’s really critical to experience Latin American culture to have a greater understanding of it,” Duffy said.

Professor Marta Umanzor from San Miguel was able to prepare the group for service work in a sensitive setting.

“We were told by professor Umanzor that we were there to watch and listen, and not to be too noisy, too pry, or putting out too much of our own opinions,” Lipinski said.

El Salvador is in northern Central America. It has a Pacific Ocean coastline, and a population of about 6 million people in an area the size of Massachusetts. El Salvador was the site of a 12-year civil war that ended in 1992. The war had cost an estimated 80,000 lives, uprooted about 1 million people, and destroyed the country’s infrastructure.

The group arrived in El Salvador at the end of the dry season so the ground was scorched brown by the high heat and lack of rain.

“It was a 70-degree temperature difference from here (St. Michael’s),” Hadden said. “As soon as you step off the plane you feel the heat.”

Umanzor’s brother, Roberto Robles, met the group at the airport. Robles hired a van to take the group the 75 miles to San Miguel and provided any other assistance they needed.

“That’s an incredible gift to be able to have when you go on a service trip. Someone who is 106 percent in their heart available that way,” Tyler-O’Reilly said.

Before heading to San Miguel, the group was able to spend some time in San Salvador. There they saw the “gigantes” United States Embassy building, which is four blocks square, and also visited the assassination site of Archbishop Oscar Romero. Romero was an outspoken advocate for human rights and peace until the day he was murdered, March 24, 1980.

After this “powerful experience,” the group got a glimpse of the American influence on El Salvador as they walked around the upscale Metro Center shopping center in the capital city.

The adventure continued as the group made its way to San Miguel. On the road to San Miguel the group got a glimpse of the varying landscapes of El Salvador, as well as a taste of some of the products the people produce, including fresh cocoa and sugar cane juice.

The group members didn’t only go for the fun, food and beauty of El Salvador. They bought 70 pounds of supplies to an orphanage, nursing home, day care center and medical clinic in the rural town of San Miguel. Many of the supplies were aquired through donations and fund-raisers, such as the “angelitos” Christmas tree and the Valentine’s Day candy sales held by the modern languages department that raised about $2,200.

The first stop in San Miguel was the orphanage, Aldes Infantil San Antonio. The orphanage was started in 1973 when a Franciscan priest decided to help the large number of children wandering the streets.

“It’s not the stereotypical orphanage with a bunch of beds lined up in a big room,” Duffy said. “It’s more of a community or family.”

Because the parish runs the orphanage, money is always in demand. To help support the orphanage, the family of Michael Cronen donated $900 in memory of their late son, Cunneen, Chiss of 2004, wanted to go on the trip but was killed in an accident last summer. A plaque made in his honor now hangs in the orphanage.

The 34 children at the orphanage range in age from 3 months to 21 years old. Most of the children are at the orphanage for economic reasons, but some are there because their parents were killed in the civil war.

Hadden said it was hard to be around some of the children because as soon as you get attached to them, it’s time to go home. He recalled a case 5-year-old nam Griselda.

“She totally won me over,” Hadden said.

See EL SALVADOR, Page 7
EL SALVADOR: Bringing help to the young and old

Continued from Page 6

Lipinski had a picture of a week-old boy wrapped in a blanket. The infant was left at the shelter in a suitcase. Supposedly a young boy dropped the baby off because his cousin was neglecting the baby, Lipinski said.

"They get more benefits and more opportunities being raised in this orphanage than they would if they were raised in the poverty of their own home," Lipinski said.

The group spent mornings tutoring, playing and carrying out projects with the children. The projects included arts and crafts, bicycle repair, making play dough, setting up a laptop computer, and "green up time," which included picking up garbage and cleaning the roofs of the houses where the children lived. Lipinski wrote in the final report.

Even though the group members were the only Americans in San Miguel, they were welcomed with hugs, and the occasional "gringo" greeting.

"I didn't feel like we stuck out," Duffy said. "I knew we did, but I didn't feel it." This was some of the orphan's' first encounter with Americans, but they had still managed to form a grandmous or inflated perception of the United States, Duffy said.

"They asked me questions like, "Are there clouds in the United States, and does everybody eat pizza?" he said.

Each home has about seven children being taken care of by one mother. The mother gets only three days off a month to be with her own family. All the children go to school and wear uniforms. They are taken to school by truck because the bus was broken.

"There's a poverty of material things but there's not a poverty of spirit," Lipinski said. "I think in some cases we have a poverty of spirit in our country."

The faith of the people in San Miguel was always evident. Lipinski recalled falling in and out of dreams to the sounds of church bells at 5:30 a.m. Mass is broadcast over loud speakers at 6 p.m., and "beautiful" Christian rock can be heard throughout the day.

"It's like religion has totally infiltrated their entire being," Lipinski said. "Their faith is what drives their life."

The group saw the Salvadoran spirit at the nursing home, too. Many in the nursing home, Avila San Antonio, have mental problems from the traumatic loss of loved ones.

"Only a few were really with it," Duffy said. "Besides interacting with residents, the group painted seven rooms in the women's section of the nursing home. After their busy, fun-filled days, the group retired to four rooms in the parsonage of the Italian priest of the Oratorio San Jose."

For Lipinski, one of the most moving moments in the nursing home came when one of the workers said, "All we really care about our children because they're our future, but we have to care about our elders because they're our past."

"It was a beautiful insight," Lipinski said.

And though the trip ended nearly a month ago, the memories from El Salvador will stick with the group for a long time.

"It definitely changed my perspective on the world," Duffy said. "We should be happy with what we have, and not unhappy with what we don't have."

Hadden shared Duffy's sentiments, adding that everyone cares about social inequities around the world, but it is different when you are actually there witnessing them.

"They will obviously benefit from what we brought," Hadden said, "but what is more important is establishing relationships for future trips."

During the MOVE group's final day, the children demonstrate a traditional dance to show their gratitude.

Photo courtesy of Craig Duffy.