The Lessons of El Salvador

Led by Mary Jane Lipinski, instructor of Spanish, five students traveled to Central America for a unique learning experience

"Stepping from the plane was all it took to realize we had left home far behind. Gone was the thin, crisp, dry New England air—air that passes through your lungs unnoticed and unimpeded. In El Salvador, the air can smother you. It's hot. It's heavy. You feel it against your chest, on your face, and swallow it in big gulps. It leaves beads of sweat on your brow and robs the moisture from your throat. Incredible," I thought, "it's gonna be brutal when the sun comes up."*

—Alexander Hadden '05

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n March 2004, Alexander Hadden was one of five students who traveled to San Miguel, El Salvador, to launch a new MOVE (Mobilization of Volunteer Efforts) student service trip to an orphanage and nursing home. The vision for the project came from Maria Umanzor, professor of Spanish language and literature, who was born there but was forced to leave during the brutal civil war (1980-1992). Craig Duffy '06, Alex Hadden '05, Kristin Beattie '06, Christopher Higgins '06, and Kaitlyn McKernan '06, enthusiastically responded to the prospect of a student service trip to Umanzor's home town, Burlington nurse Tracy Tyler O'Reilly met the group at the airport in San Salvador.

How American we are in our shorts, T-shirts, sandals and backpacks with water bottles dangling everywhere. Umanzor's brother Roberto meets us at the airport, helps us load the 12 bags of supplies we are carrying into the van, including a laptop computer, printer, portable radios, iron, towels, children's clothes and shoes, school supplies, and $200 of soap donated by a local soap company, TwinCraft, Inc. The $2,000 in funds we raised, we soon find out, will help fix a school bus at the orphanage.

It's late and we spend our first night at the home of a nanny and two orphaned teenagers, 16 and 18 years old, whose parents were friends of the Umanzor family. "They're alone," writes Alex. "Their mother passed away two years ago; the older works; the younger studies. They love MTV but are wiser than me in what it means to live and be an adult. They eagerly share their views on politics, literature and themselves. How beautiful they are, but how I don't envy their life. They will work harder than me, be infinitely kinder than me, deserve more than me, but never have the same opportunities."

En route to San Miguel the next morning we breathe in the hot early-morning air as we look out the open windows of the van and see the capital city beginning another ordinary day. We pass by fast-food chains and car dealerships that line the roads, effects of globalization and the dollarization of this tiny country. We pass modern shopping malls and the palatial U.S. embassy with its long line of Salvadorans waiting for visas. We are heading to the Universidad Centroamericana for breakfast. We eat for 92 cents and watch the students eating breakfast. Roberto tells us those are the "Mamis, tongo hombre youth who are fortunate enough to simply ask their parents for what they want, rather than work for it. The children we would meet at the orphanage can only dream of coming here to study.

The six Jesuit priests and two women who were tortured and killed by the national guard in 1989 worked at this university and we are here to visit the little museum housed here. Chris writes in his journal, "It was very sad to hear the stories. Then, we looked at the photos from the war.
They were so graphic I thought they were fake.

"The worst is what you don't see," says Roberto, on the verge of tears.

"You must become immune to the violence to protect yourself." No one speaks as we leave for the church where Abbe J. Romero was killed in 1980 while saying Mass. We see a plaque calling him a prophet and martyr. Plaques from families line a wall and attribute miracles of healing to him.

The giant volcano that shadows the city announces San Miguel. We take narrow streets until we see a large gate, a large tangerine church and many little blue houses. We have arrived at the orphanage, Alda Infantil San Antonio. Alex remembers, "The kids rush out of nowhere. They are sharks, we are their prey. They fix on our attention. They grab us, latch onto us, scramble for our attention. They steal our cameras, take pictures of themselves, us or nothing at all."

The children live in simple houses in 'families' of seven to nine children with a house mother, who gets three days a month to go home to her family. Some house mothers have grown children; others have children miles away who are the ages of the orphans. About 94 children live here, ages three months to about 18 years.

After a morning of tutoring, the children in their homes and "greening-up" around the Aldea, we hag around the entrance waiting for the morning school group to return. Many of the afternoon children are with us, in their uniforms, with shining faces and smiles. As we wait, Chris finishes fixing the bikes surrounded by energetic helpers. Tracy struggles with her limited-but-improving Spanish in the amusement and help of a child who is more a teacher than a student. Kristin is walking with a child on her shoulder, while Katie has one on each arm swinging her in a circle. Alex invariably is carrying a three-year-old Giselda who is sucking on a mango.

When not in school or helping in their home, the children roam the spacious Aldea village like free-range chickens, climbing trees, playing basketball, riding bicycles with flat tires, and rolling in the dirt. "There is grass, barbed wire and trash everywhere, yet the children rarely are seriously hurt. This is very different from the United States where we childproof everything," Katie observes. We hear a truck coming, and amid squalls, the children, like a bouquet of blue, white and brown in the back of the pickup, return from school.

We are all inspired by the young energetic nun who lives their faith.

Kristin writes, "The nuns are so amazing. They make each child feel so special. Today I was thinking about how these kids are blessed. I work with children who live in low-income housing projects in Burlington and think that the kids here might be better off... they have a wonderful support system and lots of love." We stand and listen to the nuns pray then, like a family, talk, laugh and enjoy lunch.

After lunch we leave the convent and hike the two miles to the nursing home, where we enter the fortress that houses 120 residents. There are the very old, crippled, blind, insane and vacant, living with the elegant, lively, sociable, warm-hearted and wise. Our job here is to paint the wainscoting in the women's section. It's hot and suffocating work, but we manage to finish seven rooms in the week we are there. We paint in teams, often pausing to talk with the residents who watch us with curiosity and greet us with smiles. It's hard for us to understand their Spanish as many don't have teeth, but we manage somehow. One of the staff remarks to us, "It's important to care for the children, for they are our future, but we can't forget our elderly, for they are our past."

The rectory of the Oratorio San Jose, where the Italian priest has graciously opened his home to us, is a beloved haven after a long, hot and active day. We are filled with dust and sweat and, as most of the time, the shower works. We talk about our experiences for hours in the evening. Sometimes Roberto picks us up or takes us out in his orange pickup. We cut the snack food we brought along, and on several days, don't resist the temptation to order a pizza. We wake up to the 5 a.m. bells that signal Mass and dwell in sacred/contemplative as the PA blasts upbeat Christian rock. This parish supports both the orphanage and the nursing home.

On the last day, the teenagers who live at the orphanage decide to practice their crusty El Salvadoran folk-dance steps and put on a show for us. The little ones sing and dance and we sing and play guitar. We hand out bars of soap and take a zillion Polaroids for souvenirs and, in the wake of hugs, tears, sad faces and smiles, begin our last trek to the rectory forever changed.

Katie sums up our experience, "I gained more than I ever imagined from this trip. Before we left, I assumed that our purpose was to help the people of El Salvador. I thought that bringing supplies would make the people happier and make their lives easier. What I didn't realize was how much the people of El Salvador would give me. Although we brought them necessities, we were not improving their lives. If anything, the Americans are the ones lacking. We have an excess of material goods, but we are missing some of the key ingredients to a fulfilling lie: compassion, faith, relationships, and contentment."