

As the plane descended, I looked around me; I saw tiny, one-room wooden homes with leaky and rusted roofs, discarded helicopters sitting on either side of the runway, left to rot after a brutal civil war over 30 years ago, and a town battered by a hurricane just a few years ago. Livestock roamed the streets, so famished it was a wonder they had the strength to walk. Our destination was an orphanage in a nearly forgotten town named Puerto Cabezas, Nicaragua, where children eagerly waited for us to come play with them. Stepping off the airplane into the Caribbean heat, we could not wait to reconnect with the kids we had formed bonds with in years past.

Stepping into a third-world country will always astound me. Being from the United States, the contrast between my own country and Nicaragua was appalling. As our school bus pulled our missions team into the gates of the orphanage, I relived the experiences I had the past year. While I had only been to the orphanage once before a year ago, many of the kids still greeted me by name with “¡Hola Charlie!” or “¡Hola amigo!” They all remembered us vividly.

As the week continued, we had the chance to see parts of the town and the extreme poverty they face. One day, we went into a small village an hour from where we stayed on the coast. Before we left, we were told we would be attending the opening of a new church, and that those attending only spoke the native language, Miskito. Upon arriving, we saw a cement outline of a small building with crude cutouts in the walls as doors and windows; there was no lighting and only packed dirt as a floor. Once families started to arrive, I immediately felt a sense of community with these people whom I had never before met. While there was a language barrier, playing games with these kids showed me a completely new side of the world which most Americans never have the opportunity to experience.

Seeing the happiness and laughter of these kids, whether they had families or were orphans in Puerto Cabezas, has made me see people from a completely new perspective. Before, being isolated and so far removed from extreme poverty, I was never able to relate to or sympathize with those from unfamiliar backgrounds. Now that I have formed bonds with these new friends, I understand the daily struggles they face, and I no longer feel like the third world exists as a distant place.

Because of these experiences, I have pursued AP level Spanish and created a club, called Friendship Without Borders, to help tutor the growing immigrant population at my school. One day last year in my Spanish class, we met with the ESL students and had the chance to talk with them about their culture and practice both our Spanish and their English. We noticed many problems in the ESL education system; they were being taught complex subjects in English while they could barely even hold a simple conversation. Their performance and retention was subsequently extremely low. We took this as an opportunity to serve the Lord and to pursue relationships between us and them.

Through this club we have raised both the grades and the interest level of the ESL students. As fellow students, we capture their attention better than the teacher and textbook can alone. We can explain concepts to the students that they would not understand unless they were spoken to in their native language. By helping the students with simple tasks such as reading and writing, we have become friends with them and have helped them adjust to our school community. This has brought a new dynamic to the school, promoting unity instead of division. The ESL students have noticed our passion to serve, and we hope that this gives them confidence in both their schoolwork and in their daily lives.

The club has been greatly appreciated by the ESL teachers and students. The ESL students are much more focused now due to the bilingual helpers in the class. Whereas before they often only spoke in Spanish to each other and English to their teachers, they now comfortably practice their English with the helpers and each other and receive much more one-on-one time.

It is my hope that I can continue serving my community in new ways through my knowledge of Spanish both at home and around the world. I hope to major in Aeronautics and Spanish at Liberty University in the Fall. Doing so will allow me to continue helping the Hispanic community, both at home and abroad. I look forward to seeing how the Lord will use me to work for his cause in the future.