



Teaching and Serving in Nicaragua

Teaching children something useful and important and having them understand me was a powerful experience,” said Mary Ann Richardson Pratt about her time in Nicaragua. “I also learned so much from the people I met there; everyone was open, kind, and welcoming with what little they had.” Pratt, a Latin American studies major, recently interned near the city of Granada as the first volunteer intern for Vivifica Nica, a nonprofit organization that provides service opportunities in Nicaragua for university students.

Pratt stayed with a local family in San Blas across from a plantain farm and spent her days alternating her volunteer time between a primary school in Santa Clara and a special needs school in Granada. Every day she found a worker to drive her to the schools, usually riding on a motorcycle or on the back of a truck. At the Santa Clara primary school, kindergarten through middle school children gathered in one room. “It

was the poorest school I attended,” she noted. “I taught mostly basic English to kids from ages five to thirteen.”

Pratt was frank about the teaching environment. “There were about forty kids in each classroom, and all of the children were on different levels academically. Their desks are falling apart, and the classrooms are constructed with concrete walls and tin roofs that magnify any sounds, making it loud and hard to hear,” she said. “It rains a lot in Nicaragua, and many students can’t come to school because of flooding dirt roads. If they are at school, you can’t hear anything over the din made on the tin roofs.”

Pratt’s experience wasn’t limited to school buildings. She and the high school students conducted a census in San Blas. “We gathered information about each house and their occupants and took videos of them responding to questions about their lives and giving advice that we later showed at a community party we hosted,” she explained. Pratt also taught adults in Santa Clara how to make pancakes and plantain tortillas, and she taught American dances, English lessons, and self-defense classes for the women.

Although the work was meaningful, it wasn’t easy. “Nicaragua is extremely hot and humid, and the minute you step out of the cold shower in the morning, you already start sweating,” she lamented. “No matter what time of day it is, you feel lazy, tired, and hungry. Despite this, the children at the schools made my sacrifice to drag my tired self around worth it.”

The experience was an eye-opening one. “I realized how disadvantaged the children in Nicaragua are compared to other countries,” she said. “Young children aren’t encouraged to learn, work hard, or seek more education. Not many in the society advance, and the community stays about the same throughout the years. Some students told me that when they get bad grades the teacher will hit them, and many don’t return to school.”

Pratt did her best to show each student and community member that they are capable of learning and succeeding. “I learned to love and respect the people I lived with and helped,” she said. And the Nicaraguans served her in return. “Even in their poor state, they always did what they could to help me. The people of San Blas and Santa Clara loved me and showed me so much kindness.”