

Megan Schilling

Class of 2016

Major in American Studies, Minor in Education, Schooling, and Society

Guatemala City, Guatemala

HANDS Organization: Esperanza Juvenil (Children's Hope)

This past fall break I had the incredible opportunity to travel to Guatemala City on a service-learning grant through CUSE. I traveled with two other Notre Dame students - Grace Giradot (class of 2015) and Chelsea Pratt (class of 2016). We served at Esperanza Juvenil, a school for impoverished children sponsored by the Boys Hope Girls Hope. Esperanza Juvenil provides an opportunity for underprivileged children from both urban and rural Guatemala to advance academically and break the cycle of poverty. Esperanza Juvenil is a tuition-free boarding school dedicated to students from low-income families who are unable to support their child's basic needs, including education. In addition to providing high quality education in preparation for university, Esperanza Juvenil also offers year-round academic, emotional, physical and spiritual support.

The week we volunteered was not a typical week for Esperanza Juvenil. They were celebrating the first college graduate since the start of the program. The week was filled with special events and special guests. For the past several months, students had been preparing for their first ever cultural night. This consisted of singing, dancing, costumes, guitars, flutes, and an incredible amount of work for both the students and the staff. Grace, Chelsea, and I helped organize costumes and worked backstage during rehearsals. As a gift and a thank you, we were allowed to sit in the audience and enjoy the actual performance on Thursday night. After only a few days of getting to know the students, we still sat in the audience like proud parents. And when all the students stood on stage singing amazing grace, it was hard to keep from tearing up. Despite the hardships these students face, from the challenges of poverty to the sexual and physical abuse, they still are just children. To see them sing and dance around stage was absolutely beautiful. No words can truly describe the experience.

To celebrate the success of its students and the program, the President and CEO of Boys Hope Girls Hope and the primary donors were also in Guatemala. We had the opportunity to sit down with them to discuss how Esperanza Juvenil grew from an idea to the program it is today and where they would like to see it go in the future. Mr. Minorini, President and CEO, also expressed sincere appreciation for the volunteer work we provided. While a week of service abroad can often feel so brief, he said, "I like to measure time not in minutes or day, but in joy units." Our week at Esperanza Juvenil had more than enough joy to last a lifetime.

I learned so much over the week about what it means to serve. It's not solely about the work that you do, but the manner in which you do it. Service to others is about being present to those you serve and creating relationships. The children at Esperanza Juvenil will always have a special place in my heart. They inspire me and drive me to take advantage of the opportunities we have here in the United States, but particularly at this