

Students Volunteer Time and Services to Children in Belize

Contributed by Andrew M. Abernathy
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OXFORD, Miss. - Ambergris Caye is a South American paradise for tourists, but for five University of Mississippi students and a professor, a Study Abroad trip to the small island off the coast of Belize proved to be a life-changing and eye-opening experience.

And it wasn't the clear, blue waters or the resorts they found so powerful - it was the people.

Kim Shackelford, associate professor of social work, traveled with three UM social work students and two non-majors - plus another student from the University of New Hampshire - to San Pedro, a town in Ambergris Caye, where they volunteered at the Holy Cross Anglican School.

Holy Cross is in San Mateo, a very poor community built on a lagoon near San Pedro. It lacks stable electricity, roads, and water and sewer systems. Built on stilts, the community includes more than 140 households. Most homes are 10-by-10-foot buildings that house as many as seven people. Residents walk on planks to get from one building to another, Shackelford said.

Each student worked closely with a Holy Cross child identified as having special needs and helped parents and teachers assess the child's academic and emotional requirements. They also conducted surveys on the possibility of establishing community health care and child and family counseling facilities.

"It's hardest when you see the houses they live in," said Ashley Rodgers, a senior social work major from Franklin, Tenn. "You have to experience it to understand all the things you take for granted."

On May 30, the group helped San Pedro citizens coordinate an awareness march against child abuse, with more than 1,000 children and adults participating. Shackelford was mentioned in the town's newspaper, The San Pedro Sun, as a volunteer and said many of the problems facing the community could be fixed with a greater presence of social workers. The paper also reported that child abuse is a growing community problem, citing two recent deaths as a result.

The program was born out of a visit Shackelford made to San Pedro in April, where she found a growing number of cases of physical and sexual child abuse. After visiting with local government officials, police and teachers, she helped

coordinate the march and the Study Abroad program.

"The Department of Human Services of Belize does a good job, but they don't have a social worker on the island," Shackelford said. "She travels in from Belize City."

The students said their eyes have been opened to a world they did not know existed.

"It was pretty heavy," said Margaret Shaw, a senior political science major from Austin, Texas. "What I wasn't expecting was how normal these kids are. They're just in horrible situations sometimes."

Shaw, who had no previous experience in social work, describes herself as "absolutely 100 percent changed" and plans on using her remaining elective credits at Ole Miss to pursue social work studies with Shackelford. She said she hopes to return to Belize after graduation in May.

On her second day in Belize, Shaw met Michelle, a 7-year-old girl who couldn't sit still, was hitting other students and at times acting inappropriately at school. Shaw worked with Michelle for three weeks, helping her calm down and concentrate on schoolwork. However, three weeks is not enough to produce permanent benefits, Shaw said.

Rodgers tutored a 10-year-old boy named Lester, who needed help learning to read in English and with basic math skills. She was struck by the children's high spirits.

"Some of these kids have to work to support their families - and that means even to have food - when they are not in school and they are still happy kids." she said. "It really makes you re-evaluate what you think you actually need."

The Holy Cross school was built when the public Roman Catholic schools became too crowded. The government funds only teacher salaries, so the school relies on donations and volunteers. However, enrollment has grown from 120 to 420 students, and the school offers the country's only school lunch program. It maintains a Web site, <http://www.holycrossbelize.org/>, where people can donate online.

Claire Graves, a junior marketing communications major from Ackerman, was one of two students whose primary responsibility was to conduct surveys in the community. Her findings show that health care is a major concern, she said, noting that the lagoon beneath the community is used for sewage and was once a garbage dump. Eye care is particularly needed, she said.

Graves, however, is confident that progress is being made. The school has started building a computer lab, and there are plans for more classrooms, a health outpost, counseling center, a playground and a safe house for children.

The students are evaluating their surveys and developing ways to design buildings that will be functional in the lagoon environment and ways to keep the outposts and counseling centers staffed. They are also trying to aid the community in teacher training, specifically in special education.

Though the work is not finished, Shackelford said she has seen a change in her students.

"The students have written journals," she said. "There are common themes. Some said they never had these strong feelings for others before this experience. They hoped they helped the children as much as the children helped them."

Shackelford plans to return to San Mateo in January on sabbatical to continue working with the community. One project on her list is to help raise money to send the recent graduates of Holy Cross to high school, which will cost an estimated \$1,000 per student. She is also trying to organize a spring break service trip next year and another Study Abroad class during 2009 May intersession.

Shackelford is seeking volunteers to help design and build the health outpost, child counseling center and safe house, and to assist with special education classes, testing and counseling children with learning disabilities and staffing the facilities. For more information or to volunteer, contact Shackelford at kshackel@olemiss.edu.

For more information about the Department of Social Work, go to <http://www.olemiss.edu/depts/socialwork/> .