

Following trip to Belize, students embrace philanthropy

by **David Williams - Monday, June 02, 2008**

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The University of Wisconsin Oshkosh faculty and students who make the annual trek to Belize not only have the chance to conduct professional research, but also they are expected to learn the importance of giving back to the community.

Mission accomplished.

The March 21-30 trip included opportunities to study monkeys at a Belizean zoo and a single day spent with primary students at nearby La Democracia School, where UW Oshkosh students taught the children about the research they were conducting and about Wisconsin.

“Being one of the two teachers, I orchestrated the lesson that we did,” said Craig Sigl '06, a fifth-grade teacher at Ronald Regan Elementary School in New Berlin. Craft projects centered on something the young students knew little about: snow.

Sigl, who is pursuing a master's in educational leadership at UW Oshkosh, signed up for the trip to Belize as a step toward earning a global education certificate.

“I was interested in going anywhere. It was just convenient that the trip was over spring break,” Sigl said.

The UW Oshkosh convoy did not come empty handed: along with their chilly lesson plan, they brought what Sigl had drummed up at a school-supply drive at Ronald Regan Elementary.

The generosity did not end when the group boarded a plane and returned to the U.S.

“We talked to the students and teachers and discovered that they had only one computer for more than 100 students at the school,” said Kathleen Stetter, senior psychology lecturer emeritus, who has been leading the Belize excursions since 1998.

Unable to afford a contractor, the Belizean teachers built a computer lab themselves; however, there was no funding for the equipment to fill it.

Christa Droste, a biology/secondary education major, spoke with Sigl and other UW Oshkosh students from the group. They knew that something needed to be done, and so they formed the Belize Philanthropy Group.

“I sympathized with the teachers' struggle to develop a working computer lab and trying to find people to donate computers to their cause,” said Droste, of Sussex, Wis.

Sigl quickly rounded up 10 computers from the New Berlin Public Schools: Rather than recycle the two-

to-three-year-old computers, the school district decided to donate them to La Democracia School.

“The only problem is that having the computers to take there is only half of the problem. They have to be shipped,” Stetter said.

The Belize Philanthropy Group currently is holding fundraisers in order to come up with the money to send the computers to Belize.

Electronic devices will be collected through Friday, June 6, at Titan Central in Reeve Memorial Union, 748 Algoma Blvd. Donated cell phones, MP3 players, Ink Jet cartridges, DVD players and movies, video games and consoles, GPS unites, and cameras and camcorders will be refurbished through EcoPhone’s electronics recycling fundraiser program.

The group hopes that the fundraiser also will make enough money to send some human resources down with the technology.

“It was Christa’s idea to go down with the computers and give workshops to the teachers and students as well,” Sigl said.

Droste, Sigl and the others intend to have an ongoing relationship with the staff and students at La Democracia School. For instance, Sigl has set up a pen-pal program between the Belizean students and his fifth-graders. The group also wants to pursue other philanthropic projects, such as aiding the Belize Zoo.

The Belize Philanthropy’s Group’s plans prove that international collaborations can be as much about giving as they are about taking.

“I think it encompasses the whole purpose of our trip,” Stetter said. “We always try to give something back to the country that so graciously allows us to do research there. It’s wonderful that the students want to do more.”

Droste agrees: “Our group visited La Democracia as an opportunity for community outreach. They taught us a thing or two as well.”

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