

Student writers bring back stories of Nicaragua

by Amanda Munger - Wednesday, April 14, 2010

<http://www.uwosh.edu/today/2633/student-travel-writers-bring-stories-of-nicaragua-back-to-oshkosh/>

Natalee Kasmiskie wanted to travel abroad to expand her horizons and broaden her outlook on life. A recent trip to Nicaragua not only allowed her to do that, but also to write about it.

Kasmiskie, a junior at the University of Wisconsin Oshkosh, travelled to Nicaragua with 10 other students enrolled in English 302: Advanced Composition in Humanities, English 350: Literary Study Tour—Optional Content, or English 405: Creative Writing.

The trip was sponsored by Compas de Nicaragua, a nonprofit organization whose mission is to promote cultural exchange and improve lives through service trips and sustainable community development work in urban and rural Nicaragua.

Douglas Haynes, an English professor at UW Oshkosh, traveled with the students to their two destinations: rural La Paz and Managua, the poor, urban capital.

Haynes and the students will present photos, videos and excerpts of their writings during “Stories of Service Learning in Nicaragua: A Student/Faculty Account of Study and Writing Abroad” at 4 p.m. Thursday, April 15, in Room 215 of Reeve Memorial Union, 748 Algoma Blvd.

While in Nicaragua, Haynes and the students stayed with host families and created lasting friendships with them.

“The family I stayed with never had students stay with them, and the bond we created was amazing,” she said. “They were so giving and compassionate. I still keep in contact with them today and hope to go back soon.”

Haynes said being able to stay with host families allowed students to see what life is like for the majority of the world, where people live in houses with dirt floors, have outdoor bathrooms and eat small, simple meals.

Kasmiskie, a communication and radio-TV-film major, said her time in Nicaragua made her appreciate the simple things.

“I learned that there are other ways to live,” she said. “There are other ways to get through life. There are more important things in life than e-mails and media and student organizations and everything I get so wrapped up in.”

Making a difference through working, writing

Throughout their trip, which lasted from Jan. 6 to 19, students worked on two different service projects.

In La Paz, they dug three-meter-long and two-meter-wide pits for bio-gas stoves to be installed. Bio-gas stoves are a free, sustainable source of fuel using animal manure.

In Managua, the students helped install gray-water drainage systems for shanties made out of tin and scrap wood. The people who built the shanties were able to tap into the city's water line but did not have any way of draining the water. The drainage systems filter the water and move it from their yards.

Haynes said service work is a way for North Americans and Nicaraguans to spend time together and promote conversation and solidarity between them.

"The Nicaraguans can do these projects without us," he said. "They don't need our help, per se. What they need is people to bear witness to what their lives are like, and that's where the writing comes in."

The students wrote personal narratives about their experiences in Nicaragua, which they will share at the April 14 presentation, along with pictures and video of the trip. Haynes said the writings were a way for them to learn how to bridge cultures through travel writing.

"They have to think about the problems that come up when writing about people that are different from us," he said. "The writers have to take into account how they represent other people and how they position themselves in relation to them."

One of the essays that will be presented, written by junior Elise Stuebs, an English and journalism major at UW Oshkosh, focuses on what a day in the life of women in Nicaragua is like.

Haynes plans to organize a trip for students like this every other year, with the next one occurring in January 2012.

- For more information about studying abroad at UWO, visit www.uwosh.edu/oie/index.php.
- For more information on Compas de Nicaragua, visit www.compas1.org.