

Madonna Students spend Spring Break serving, not lying, in the sun.

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Madonna offered students a different kind of spring break this year. Led by instructors Veronica Riha, Andrew Domzalski and Boguslawa Gaterek, ten students ventured to Costa Rica.

“Most of my friends also went somewhere sunny and warm for spring break, but their days were spent sun bathing on the beach and sipping Pina Coladas!” described Susan Matthews-Dragich. “On the other hand I spent my spring break getting up at 6am, site seeing, working, and hiking until 8pm or so.”

As a nursing major Matthews-Dragich is used to hard work, which made the tasking experience more manageable.

Amber Gingiloski, Paralegal major at Madonna headed into the experience knowing that while this trip may be fun, it was not a vacation. She offered advice for other students who may want to participate in service-learning trips in the future.

“I think a participant should be flexible and understand that the trip is not a vacation,” said Gingiloski, “but an opportunity to combine culture immersion with improving the lives of those who belong to that culture.”

During their week in Costa Rica, the students and faculty traveled from the Atlantic coast of the country to just miles before the Pacific Ocean.



“The greatest amount of plant and animal diversity in the world found in Costa Rica,” said Riha, a biology professor at Madonna. “I thought I had died and went to biology heaven.”

While the Biology students mainly focused on wildlife and the environment, this trip was designed to meet the needs of two other programs; Humanities and Spanish.

The Spanish students turned their attention more towards the language of the natives as well as Costa Rican culture. In addition they helped out their fellow travelers with emergency vocabulary cards.

“They were just little cards, small enough to fit in a wallet or passport, but they were very useful” explained Fatima Salemessi. “The cards contained phrases such as ‘where is the bathroom?’ and ‘I’m lost, I need help!’”

As the Spanish instructor at Madonna, Salemessi was unable to go on the trip because of teaching responsibilities but hopes to go next time.

Humanities, the other program represented in the trip, spent time working with the biology students at Las Torgugas, one of the sea turtle rescue centers on Costa Rica. This work entailed cleaning the beaches as well as conducting turtle night walks. Groups of students would walk the beaches at night protecting the sea turtle’s eggs which are commonly poached. Thankfully the students did not encounter any poached but were able to witness a massive turtle come from the water, lay eggs and return to the ocean.

“We were very lucky we got to see a huge leatherback turtle come up, lay eggs, and cover the eggs up, the whole thing,” described one of Madonna’s Humanities instructors, Domzalski.

Turtles were only just an element of the trip. The group from Madonna also visited an indigenous community, the tribe of Bri-Bri, an hour walk into the jungle. Experiencing the culture of the Bri-Bri’s was well received by Madonna students.



“I think my favorite part of the trip was the day we went to the school (in the indigenous community) and played with the children,” said Matthews-Dragich. “There we ate lunch with them. They showed us a few native dances and then had us join in with them! It was so much fun, and to see their smiling faces and to hear their joyous laughter really made for an amazing experience.”

Additionally students visited a wildlife rescue center in the heart of the country. Tasks varied from cleaning out animal cages to digging ditches so the enclosures would not fill with water.

Throughout the trip, students were able to as experience “real-life” situations as well as learn by servicing others.

Domzalski describes service learning as something that “it adds a different dimension. It doesn’t decrease the academic, only enhances it.”

Cayle Lackten, a history and political science major at Madonna explains service-learning as “a way that lets me to gain a greater understanding of the world and how others live their lives. It allows me to gain a more vested interest in my studies and helps me to excel in the classroom.”

If all goes according to plan, the next service-learning trip to Costa Rica is planned for the Spring break of 2014.

“The students loved it,” said Riha. “I have already had students tell me they want to go back and students who did not go, that would like to go next time.”