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Building Hope in Guatemala

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Building hope in Guatemala

It's 8 a.m. in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala, and at 8,000 feet elevation, January frost clings to a dingy metal wheelbarrow full of sand. Soon, Linfield College volunteers will peel off layers of clothing as the sun and hard work warm them.

Through her gloves, Becca Williams '10 feels the sting of her blisters as she grips the rope attached to the wheelbarrow and gazes 60 yards up the terraced hill to the building site. With a deep breath, she begins pulling the load up the slope – she is the “burro” – as a partner pushes from behind. The two work as a team and, with muscles burning, move the sand up the hill.

That's how some houses are built in Guatemala.

Williams and 12 other Linfield students took part in the January Term course Guatemalan Development and Underdevelopment, taught by Jeff Peterson, associate professor of sociology. In a unique collaborative effort, students were joined by 17 McMinnville Habitat for Humanity volunteers.

Together, they moved rock and gravel, hoisted bags of cement and transported blocks by human brigade. They mixed cement with shovels and hoes, cut wire, bent rebar and laid blocks, all the while learning age-old techniques from Guatemalan carpenters.

“A mason grabbed a piece of clear plastic tubing and put water in it, and it became a level,” said Bob Ledden, a retired pastor and member of McMinnville Cooperative Ministries. “I had never seen that before in my 70-plus years.”

The McMinnville group worked on four homes

with Global Village/Habitat Guatemala, a branch of Habitat International. It builds 3,500 homes each year, with a goal of 5,000, to address the shortage of 1.6 million homes in Guatemala.

Linfield students and volunteers, ranging in age from their teens to 70s, built houses in the morning and spent afternoons in classes on Mayan culture, social movements, urbanization and the civil war.

“Too often we talk about getting students ready for the outside world as if the worlds are separate,” Peterson said. “But community members wrestle with the same questions. It was important for folks of different generations to work together.”

Peterson, a Habitat volunteer for five years, grew up in Brazil, lived in Mexico and has twice been the field director for Linfield's Oaxaca, Mexico, program. Through such immersion projects, volunteers make contacts and become part of a community, he said.

“It's hard to make assumptions about another group when you interact with them,” Peterson added. “This allows people to see each other as human beings, and on a global level, to develop a better understanding of the world in which we live. We come to see Linfield as a point of intersection for many communities, rather than only as a destination point.”

The trip's emphasis on learning drew Doug Cruikshank, professor emeritus of education, and his wife, Linda, a former kindergarten teacher. They have volunteered for Habitat since retiring in 2001.



Jeff Peterson, right, associate professor of sociology, and Marianne Mills '72, executive director of Habitat for Humanity, talk with Doña Manuela, left, whose son and family will move into the home. Mills said the trip was a combination of learning, service and adventure.

“There was never a question about whether we would want to go or not,” said Doug. “We knew the kind of richness we could get from being part of the January Term class.”

A bonus was the opportunity to work with students.

“They had a whole lot more energy than we did, but we worked as hard as they did,” he said.

During free time in the afternoons, Williams ventured to cafes and schools to interview locals for her project on indigenous language and identity and saw firsthand the concepts she’d been learning about in class – poverty, housing and Mayan identity, among others.

“At our Habitat site we interacted with people who are affected by the housing deficiency,” she said. “We met people who can tell us what it’s like to be Mayan in Guatemala and the issues of having to learn Spanish and lose their indigenous language.”

This was Williams’ third trip to Latin America and she insists it won’t be her last. She plans to study abroad in Ecuador next spring, continuing her Guatemalan research relating to language identity for her honors thesis. After graduation, she hopes to teach abroad.

“The experience expanded my understanding and my view of the world,” she said.

At the final dedication dinner, tears of gratitude and understanding fell freely. Volunteers exchanged mementoes with the family, said Williams, who was humbled by the generosity of her hosts.

“For three weeks we’d been working next to these families and having conversations with them,” she added. “It was bittersweet to say goodbye.”

– Laura Davis



John Torsey '09 and Becca Williams '10 use a wheel barrow to move sand up the terraced hill to the building site.



Linfield students and McMinnville community members worked together on four Habitat for Humanity houses during a January trip to Guatemala. Linfield students plan to return to Guatemala in March for an alternative spring break project. This home, located on a rural site in the steep hills outside Quetzaltenango, is nearly ready for a roof.