

Meet the Group

Posted on [April 15, 2014](#) by [Dorian](#)



Every year a group of UP students participate in the Nicaragua Service Learning Immersion, a three week summer trip that includes home-stays, service in local areas, and presentations on topics such as foreign policy, social justice, and fair trade. We are an incredibly diverse and eclectic group from varying majors, ethnicities, and perspectives. This year's group consists of twenty people including Spanish professor Andrea Castanette and Moreau Center Interim Director Dr. Dave Houghlum.

Live Update from Denver: One Flight Down, Two to Go

Posted on [May 7, 2014](#) by [Dorian](#)

Bags are packed, goodbyes have been said, and our journey has commenced. Whether we (most wisely) decided to get some rest, or stayed up into the early hours of the morning past the time we crawl into bed on weekend mornings, we all made it to the P-Safe parking lot at 3am, bleary-eyed and anticipated for the hours to come.

I think most of the group can agree on the trip not being “real” to us yet. Though we have checked our bags and emerged from the first of three airlines, Nicaragua still seems far off – a place we have only seen in pictures, a place as removed from our realities as the impersonal PowerPoint slides, magazine pages, and Google image searches that have flashed before our eyes throughout the greater part of the school year. Something has changed though – we are no longer planning or even in Portland; we have already completed the first leg of our journey. Later tonight, we will be thousands of miles away from home and everything we have come to know. Yet amidst the initial overwhelming chaos and novelty of it all, I think we’ll find more similarities than we ever thought possible – because that’s the beauty of the overarching, uniting thread of humanity that runs through us all, right?

The Denver airport is just like any other – a waiting place, a meeting place, a place where you get to glimpse blips of thousands of lives as they walk by, each person on a separate journey. Some of us sit hunched in our chairs, having succumbed to boredom or exhaustion. Others walk about the airport, or partaking in impromptu group workouts at the gate. Others still sit quietly, waiting, waiting. We wait together and we wait alone, each person absorbed my thoughts and feelings, sights and sounds. We wait for Houston and after that, Managua and the Nicaraguan night, a place to finally rest our heads. We wait for the journey to be over and for the real one to begin.

Live Update From Houston: Almost There!

Posted on [May 7, 2014](#) by [Dorian](#)

We are, to put it quite frankly, pooped. We’ve all been up since 3am or well before, napping only in short intervals on the plane or at the gate. Though we are all functional, exhaustion is starting to take its toll – the bags under our eyes deepen as the bags we carry get a little heavier. I guess.

Houston is humid, foreshadowing the brick wall of heat and humidity waiting to hit us as we arrive in Managua. Somehow the trip still doesn’t seem real. I feel as if I am writing a war or travel journal like some soldier in a rural area as depicted by Hollywood – this is kind of a Dances With Wolves-type entry, eh? Or perhaps that’s just the exhaustion speaking.

The wait continues as we prepare for the final stretch. Journals are being written in, bad airport food (mostly Panda Express) is being scarfed down, and conversation flits from one topic to another as quickly as people walk by. Al. Most There!

Day One: CHECK

Posted on [May 9, 2014](#) by [Jenna](#)

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Well, we made it! Today has been overwhelming, yet extremely exciting. We started off the trip thinking about our hopes, expectations, and fears. Most of the group expressed concerns about not being able to communicate with the locals that we meet and from that not being able to make the personal connections we came here to make. However, being immersed in the culture today I think most of us learned very quickly that it will be okay. And that a smile is the same in every language 😊

First impressions and observations:

-Everything is in beautiful color. The playgrounds are all rainbow and it's so awesome. The colors here are so much brighter than back at home

-It's hot and humid and sticky

-All the locals wear pants despite the previous observation. Can't decide if it's because they're used to the weather, or it's just their culture

-In the morning the birds go crazy, and it sounds like we're in a tropical wonderland

-Had two scoops of ice cream, less than \$1.00. Did I mention it was in a waffle cone?

-Made friends with a gecko that slept in our room last night. The name is still pending. Stay posted

-Time isn't really a thing here, they call it hora Nica....we love it

-We bought a pound of rice, beans and corn, 3 onions, 6 passion fruits, a pineapple, and a bag of peppers for the equivalent of \$4.00. I don't know about you, but that's a pretty good deal if you ask me

-The locals here are very nice, and love calling out at us "chelas"

Later in the afternoon today we went to a market. It's a little bit hard to put in to words what exactly we saw, but there were definitely parts of it that were run down. The meat was just sitting out and there were flies and bugs and dogs everywhere. However, everything there was super cheap and affordable. We were able to get a lot of food for the money that we had. After we were done at the market, we drove probably 5-7 minutes to a very large, air conditioned mall. Walking in we all felt completely out of place in our t-shirts and shorts. Everyone was dressed up, the women were in makeup, and the stores were extremely nice. There was Ralph Loren, Payless, Nike and even a TCBY. We compared the prices to what they were in the US and at the market

that was a 5 minute drive away and were astounded. The prices at the mall were comparable to what it would cost in the US, but about 5 times as expensive as what it was at the market. There is no way that your typical worker in Nicaragua could afford to shop at that mall, which could be seen by the lack of people who were there. The wealth distribution has never been more apparent to me, and it was almost difficult being in the mall knowing that so many people couldn't afford any of it. Also, I'd had never felt the influence of America in a foreign country so prevalent, but felt so completely out of place. It left a weird pit in my stomach.

Things were put in perspective today. We sweat, laughed, had fun, learned, got some sun, and are so excited for what is to come. This trip is already proving to be more than we thought it would be, and we all can't wait for what Day Two has in store.



xoxo,

Juvenile J

Day Two

Posted on [May 10, 2014](#) by [Haylee](#)

Day 2? It feels like we have been here at least a week! So many smells, sounds and wonderful sights throughout Nicaragua all put into perspective today.

We met this awe-inspiring woman today that just loved life and strived to serve. She had worked through so many obstacles just to help others because it was fascinating to her and she loved the feeling of it. This always energetic, always happy woman told us to write our story in our heart and in our mind because we only live once. All of this coming to us as we are driving by a sector that was once the city dump now turned into shacks for families. Her story will forever be imprinted in my heart.

In other news, in case you all were still wondering, we finally named our gecko Frank and found that he has two other friends living in our bathroom! As you would imagine, Bekah was not too pleased of these findings but Jenna and I were ecstatic that we had a little gecko family for our room!

As the day continued we enjoyed a little bit of shopping and hearing the story of these hardworking bananeros, aka banana workers. They told us their story and fight with this chemical, Nemagon, that caused various diseases and illnesses in almost all workers involved with the development of the bananas. Unfortunately, our country, the amazing USA, refuses to recognize this issue that the chemical did cause these problems and was used. This chemical was originally banned in the US because it was fatal to humans and yet companies like Dole took it to countries like Nicaragua to use as a pesticide and harm these workers as well as their future generations, as the chemical lasts 120 years. So my question for the day is when, why, and how does one decide a life is worth more or less than another? I don't know the answer nor do I know or understand the entire story behind this battle but the side of the US is not looking so hot.

Now I'm off to learn some salsa lessons to dance with the locals so stay rad ladies and gents.

In the Campo: Ramón García

Posted on [May 19, 2014](#) by [Dorian](#)

Campo (n.) – the countryside. For the past few days the group has done a home stay in Ramón García, a rural community in the Nicaraguan countryside. Our stay comprised of everything you might think of: weird toilets, lots of dirt, hella giant bugs. But there was also so much more. In the campo we found one of the most beautiful landscapes - rolling green hills, clear blue skies, a tight-knit community unified by a single dirt road that serves as a tangible reminder of the unity of the people. We saw, interacted with, and for a time, lived with a people who welcomed with open arms and open hearts, a people who treated us as if we were one of their own. Here are some recollections of our immersion:

Taylor Hendricks

I encountered fireflies for the first time and admired monkeys as they swung through the canopy. I heard the noises of baby chicks, pigs, roosters, puppies, and flies as if they were the sounds of a single creature – a single species. The hymn of the river in our backyard brought it all to a balance. However, it wasn't my eyes or ears that made this experience unforgettable, it was the commotion within my heart, the feeling that all unwanted pressures had been wrenched out of

me and replaced with content much more worthy of protection...the sigh of relief that stress so overdue was finally withering away.

In all honesty, solitude scares me. I know what loneliness can do to people, what it *has* done to people I love. I've seen it, and I've felt it, but I never imagined how accompanied I would feel in such a distant, unfamiliar, and underpopulated place. Who knew that 3 days of walking 3 adorable little girls to school each morning would form a bond that for me, would lead to withdrawals upon saying goodbye? Who knew that smiles could be the primary means of communication between 6 year old Natalia and I, yet still yield one of my most treasured friendships I've ever experienced? I certainly didn't. And I certainly didn't expect Doña Paola, our host mother, to shed tears as we walked down that dirt road for the last time.

I guess it's true when people tell us that the little things in life matter the most– that if done with passion and humbleness, small changes make the biggest impact. This experience has taught me a lot about simplicity and compassion, while reminding me that I too am strong. I too can make changes I wish to see for myself and for the world. I too am loved, and likewise have the capacity to love beyond all expectation and boundary. Gracias to the small community that breathed life back into this young mind of mine!

Laura Kehoe

Spending time in the campo was an amazing experience. I never knew I could develop such amazing bonds with people I had just met. The families who opened their hearts and homes to us were some of the kindest, most inspirational people I have ever had the pleasure of knowing. Even though we were strangers, they treated us like valued members of their family and took great care to make sure we felt at home in their community.

In the campo, I discovered so much about myself and what it means to appreciate life. You don't need fifty pairs of shoes or the latest piece of technology to be happy. You can find joy in anything – even an activity as seemingly mundane going to get water from the pump. In fact, it's the simple pleasures that often have the greatest impact on ones life. If you have the love and support of family and friends, you can find an immense amount of happiness.

I come away from my time in the campo with a new appreciation for life. If you spend your whole life looking for the newest and greatest things, you'll never see how many wonderful gifts are right in front of your eyes. Once you take the time to stop and appreciate what you have, you'll see just how beautiful and truly wonderful this world is. All you have to do is open your eyes and look.

Maggie Duwelius

The sounds in the campo were very different from the sounds I am used to hearing at home. The sounds in this place have woken me up from my unappreciated lifestyle. Walking through the aisles of Target I hear children whine to their parents about not getting the coolest new toy or listening to children in McDonalds complain about what they wanted added to their happy meal. Here in the campo the children are genuinely happy. Shortly after we arrived and I breathed

everything in I asked myself how someone could be happy in these living conditions. No running water, homes made from mud mixed with plants and cement, showering in the river, hand-washing all clothing, chickens running around next to where the food was being prepared, no kitchen appliances, sleeping on wooden platforms, and eating the same food for every meal, everyday. After three days living with my host mother I was given my answer: happiness comes from the place and the people you are surrounded by.

While playing with the children at the school I realized how much fun these children were having with what I used to consider as nothing. I played with these children for hours with a single worn out half pumped soccer ball and they were so happy. The sun was beating down on our bodies as we ran around, getting hotter and sweatier. But that didn't seem to matter. There was never a complaint, no negativity. Laughter, yelling and smiles. Nothing mattered besides who was first to this ball.

These laughs from the children in the campo were the sounds of true happiness. Refreshing. Hearing them was like someone had splashed a bucket of ice water onto my face waking me up from the materialistic view of what I had considered happiness to be. I heard the sound of real happiness in this place. Happiness based not on what they had but the people who made up this beautiful community.

Elena-Marie Tenn

The smiles, the hospitality, and care of my host family are ingrained in my heart. Doña Deliah offered her place for Rebekah and I for 3 days. Her daughter, Fabiola, and son, Ticzon, were about our age and we eventually bonded through our thoughts about music and education. It was as if we were not from different worlds at moments-their aspirations and opinions will never be forgotten from my mind. Reality hit every time I realized: all food was made from scratch, the late nights when I could not sleep due to a lack of a mattress, or when Doña Deliah spent all of her day taking care of house. Every person made sure I felt at "home" through their words and actions despite how the reality checks resonated. I find it funny that I felt more at "home" there in the campo more than any other moment. The sounds heard, the scenes seen, and the food eaten in San Ramon – aspects that were foreign, yet inspiring to be included into the culture.

I left the campo with so many questions. The children and the women I met-what happens to them when we leave? Hearing the history and current struggles of the community left me frustrated me due to the sincerity of their pain and their willingness to keep the community in tact. I desired to stay longer to understand and hear their stories, but having the experience and the emotions evoked from my experience in the campo cannot but forgot. I am not quite ready to leave Nicaragua. However, when I do, the campo will remind me to stay humble and to be more than sympathetic to strangers much could leave a great impact in my life.

Dorian Pacheco

As a Spanish speaker, I expected life in the campo to be filled with lengthy conversation and an easy bonding created with the absence of a language barrier. My host mother was Doña Maria Magdalena, a widow who has been mourning the death of her husband for the past year and a

half. Sharp, fresh pain was apparent in her posture, her cadence, her eyes. Her husband was buried less than twenty feet from the front door. She never spoke of him. She never spoke much at all, actually.

At first I was apprehensive – I didn't know what to say, how to act. I channeled all my energy into translating for others, into absorbing the sights and sounds of the community, into reaching out to give and take everything that I could. Little by little, Doña Maria opened up to us – she didn't talk to us about her thoughts or feelings, but she began to laugh openly with us, to call us by our names, and receive us with a smile. Doña Maria was more like my family and even more like myself that I had ever imagined.

By the end of our stay I was looking forward to sleeping in a warm bed, getting rid of my heat rash, and having access to running water. I wasn't sad to go although I greatly enjoyed the intense greenery, the liveliness of the community, the growing level of comfort between my host family, my partner Hailey, and I. Rather than a heart-jerking goodbye, Doña Maria and I exchanged a smile and casual wave with a new lightheartedness between us that had not existed before. I like to think that for a moment, for a day or maybe even two, Hailey and I brought a little joy to her and her family. And that made goodbyes more than bearable, but okay.