

Testimonial submitted by Stephanie Wood
Recipient of the 2009 Judith Peters *Aprender ayudando* Spanish Service Award

One of the most enriching service activities that I have participated in that allowed me to serve others through my use of Spanish was the trip to Nicaragua that I attended over spring break in 2008. It proved to be one of the best experiences in which I have been able to integrate both of my major areas of study – Elementary Education and Spanish. It was an incredible experience to have the opportunity to serve others within the culture of a Spanish-speaking country; studying a culture in textbooks and far-removed classrooms is completely different than being able to directly participate in the culture. On this trip, we were fortunate to be able to assist teachers in an elementary school classroom as well as visit and assist in two small orphanages. The most important lesson that I learned from this experience is that human compassion and love can transcend any language barriers that may exist.

In the classrooms that I assisted, I was extremely excited that I would be able to use my Spanish language skills in order to assist students who were struggling to understand the teacher's lessons. However, there was a slight obstacle that I was not expecting – it was often difficult for me to understand what the students were saying when they spoke, as they speak a dialect which is a mixture of English, Spanish, and Creole words. I was initially a bit disheartened, because I was worried that this language barrier might hinder my chance to learn about my students, as well as learn more about their culture directly from them. However, as the week progressed, we began to understand one another better, as well as find different ways to communicate to each other through smiles, notes, and pictures. I found myself presented with many opportunities to work individually with the students, encouraging their learning and discovery even as I learned more about their culture and their language. Our shared understanding of the Spanish language helped us to be able to connect and open up to one another, and helped me to be able to serve them to the best of my abilities.

The greatest lesson that I have taken away from this experience grew from the initial moment of concern I felt when I wasn't sure that my understanding of Spanish would be adequate enough to be able to serve these children in my fullest capacity. I now understand how students who speak little or no English might feel when they set foot in classrooms where they are expected to be able to communicate with the teacher and other students but struggle to be able to do so. Because I have now also experienced this sensation, as a teacher I will be able to make my classroom a welcoming place for students who may experience this struggle, just as the students at the school in Nicaragua welcomed me. As long as both parties are willing to work together, differences in language are not a hindrance to communication, but rather can be used as a stepping stone to foster mutual appreciation and willingness to learn and grow in order that one can serve to the best of his or her ability.