

The AMIGOS Experience

Tears rolled down the cheeks of every person in the crowd. Waving goodbye for the last time, they watched as the bus rolled away. Heading home, junior William Shain was leaving the very people he had come to know as family.

Six weeks of cultural integration with Amigos de las Américas, an organization dedicated to the cultural and linguistic immersion of high school and college students had completely transformed Shain.

“One word that describes your experience?” I asked.

“Life-changing,” he responded, spinning a blue string bracelet from his host community of Madriz around his wrist.

For six weeks, Shain and 54 other students from all over the United States worked in communities throughout Northern Nicaragua, separating into teams dedicated to differing service projects. From construction projects to educational seminars, there wasn't a moment to waste. Using knowledge gained in an eight month training program, Shain educated youth about important issues such as hygiene, education and contraception.

Though Amigos' primary objective is to create catalysts for change among both Latin American and American youth, Shain's experience wasn't all about service. It was also about getting to know the locals, and the other students in the program.

“The community members were some of the happiest people I have ever met; they don't need commercial value to be happy,” said Shain. “[I really learned] to appreciate everything [I] have.” Showering in a bucket, lacking basic supplies, students learn to adapt to a whole new way of life.

Shain, however, had a particular barrier to overcome upon his

arrival in Nicaragua. A few weeks into the trip, Shane contracted the Zika Virus. Zika, known to cause birth defects such as Microcephaly, and runs rampant throughout South America. In yet another stroke of bad luck, Shain was recently diagnosed with a dormant form of Dengue Fever. Thankfully, Shain returned to the U.S. safely and is not a threat to those around him. Today, he is void of any and all symptoms, and will be void of the blood-spread illness in a few months.

Junior Helen Radoff was also able to share in the Amigos experience, though in a different community. "It's so important to view cultures and ideas that are different from our own," said Radoff. "This past summer was a catalyst for change in my life."

The inspiration behind Shain and Radoff's summer experience, Senior Griffin Ansel participated in Amigos in the summer of 2015. Ansel spent his six weeks in the same community as Shain-Madriz. After two years of involvement, Ansel has successfully passed on the legacy of the Amigos' long standing activity at Miramonte. Now acting as a member of the Amigos' training staff, Ansel has the opportunity to help younger students get involved.

"I was able to watch the new participants as they found out why Amigos is so unique and valuable, and work to do the best job that they could," Ansel said. "I hope more students from Miramonte participate in Amigos, and get the life-changing experiences that it has to offer."

However, Amigos' history at Miramonte didn't begin with Ansel. Miramonte students can trace Amigos back past Kristen Plant, Miramonte's own public speaking teacher. Plant traveled to Michoacan, Mexico, after her sophomore year, and to Honduras after her junior year. "What people don't know is that you get out of it just as much as you give. People are so welcoming, opening their homes to you. It's really powerful," she said. "If I had to describe it in one word, it would be empowering."