

Miramonte Students Build Houses in Tijuana, Mexico

On March 31, Miramonte students loaded onto buses to embark on a 9 hour drive from the scenic Orinda hills down to Tijuana, Mexico. The trip was organized by Moraga Valley Presbyterian Church, through Amor, a nonprofit organization that builds homes with a goal of keeping families together, averting trafficking, promoting health and education, battling extreme poverty, promoting dignity, and strengthening communities.

The Miramonte students roughed it in a campsite, sleeping in tents, with three other churches. There were about ten teams this year from MVPC. Each group consisted of one or two student leaders and adult leaders. The leaders were given the plans on how to build the house while the student volunteers went to a workshop to learn the basics. Amor assigns each group to a family and work site. The volunteers bring their own hand tools while Amor provides the main materials.

The 8am to 4pm work day is filled with hard labor from leveling the ground to pouring the foundation. The volunteers then built the house from the ground up. The process was anything but easy. "When we were leveling our site we had to rip out all the grass and then use a pickaxe to get a stump out before framing the 22 by 11 foot house," senior Frankie Veverka said. The teams have to get all the concrete finished by Monday.

Without a doubt, every year Miramonte volunteers have bonded over the common goal of alleviating poverty through each house built. "We connect with other people around the area because we are separated from society and all responsibilities. It's freeing to go to a different place and just connect to your team and people you are with," junior Cameron Nielson said. The children of the families even came out to try to help out

as they are appreciative of the work the students are doing. "All the people who were receiving the houses or around the community were just so happy even though they had so little. They were so appreciative and it shows how we take a lot of things for granted," Nielson said.

Though the language barrier made conversation difficult, the students managed to persevere and communicate with the locals. "The mom and her two younger kids were always there while we were building," freshman Sally Peterson said. The kids are not supposed to help at the worksite but they still try to hand the volunteers supplies and offer to hammer things. "On the last day we were so ahead we played soccer with the kids for three hours," Veverka said.

In order to go on the trip, the volunteers do not need to be part of the church, nor do they have to be religious. "Usually we have bible lessons during dinner and discuss questions at lunch such as: 'What's the hardest thing you've ever been through?'. You become very close with your team," Veverka said. The bus ride home is one of the highlights of the trip as the volunteers bond over their shared experiences. "It's really cool to see how other people live and what impact we can make on other people's lives," Neilson said.