Interprofessional Healthcare Service Learning Team in Nicaragua: Better Together!

By Gay Lynn Armstrong, Clinical Assistant Professor and Marylyn Kajs-Wyllie, Clinical Associate Professor

On January 3, 2017, 19 senior nursing students and 2 nursing faculty from St David’s School of Nursing traveled to Nicaragua to continue a six-year tradition of study in Nicaragua with the International Service Learning Organization (ISL) as part of their clinical hours for their Community Health Nursing course. This year, we once again partnered with Mass Communication, who helped chronicle the event, keeping our facebook streaming alive. This was the first time other disciplines from the College of Health Professions joined the team: Respiratory Care and Clinical Laboratory Sciences. As a combined team we worked together to provide a broad range of services, learned about each other’s pivotal role in the healthcare team, and made new lifelong friends.

Our primary objective was to set up clinics in the rural communities of Masaya and Ticautepe, Nicaragua and learn the culture of the people. We spent a day learning about the Nicaraguan culture and prevalent diseases from Nicaraguan physicians. To begin our first assessment, we did home visits in the surrounding community we set up clinics for the rest of the week. The next several days, we worked in teams to obtain intake, focused assessments, interventions, patient teaching and health promotion in combination with local Nicaraguan community nurses and physicians. We were able to attend to over 60+ individuals in need of care and give back to the community with donations of medications and supplies; we ended our interprofessional volunteering with a “Give Back to the Community” screening day where nursing, lab science and respiratory care students all took part in screening and teaching children, parents, and the elderly.

We visited a nursing home in Masaya and learned about the healthcare options of the elderly, along with provision of health care for those in need. We organized a work day of painting and cleaning at an orphanage on top of the Mountains in Ticautepe, and learned firsthand the struggles of getting basic necessities for healthy living such as fresh water up the mountains.
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Our nursing students grew tremendously from the input of the other disciplines and their faculty. The five faculty members were honored to be a part of this incredible team adventure. The best way to convey the students’ experiences is in the words of one nursing student Karina Cavazos: “I recently had the opportunity to visit the beautiful country of Nicaragua to provide free medical care to the indigent. I will shamefully admit that the last few days leading up to the trip I was anything but excited. I would’ve never imagined the trip would change my life the way it did. The people I met and the memories I made will never be forgotten. One of the most amazing things I witnessed being in Nicaragua was how receptive the Nicaraguan people were to our health services. It’s fairly easy to be looked down upon in the U.S for being a student in any kind of health profession. But I can’t think of a single moment when I felt this way in Nicaragua. I remember nothing but their gratitude, their thank you’s, and how openly they each invited us into their homes and partly into their lives. For once I didn’t feel like ‘just a student’. No, for once I felt like a real nurse and it made me a lot more confident in my skills, my assessments, and my communication with patients. I can only imagine how this experience will impact my practice in the future and I hope it made an impact on the lives of the people we met in those 12 bittersweet days.”