

Students Spend Spring Break Saving Lives

Pre-Med Students Head To Nicaragua To Help Poor



Images: Students Spend Spring Break Helping Others

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BOULDER, Colo. -- The week after spring break most students at the University of Colorado were comparing their tans and stories of adventure.

Popular on the destination list this year were tanning in Cancun, surfing in California, or hitting the slopes.

Then there is Mike Forté who spent his break treating urinary infections.

"We try to help as much as we can," Forté said, talking about his recent trip to Chagra Secca – a small village in Nicaragua.

Forté and a group of about 20 CU students organized the trip to give medicine and a check-up to a village of about 15,000.

For the subsistence farmers living in Chagra, this will be the only time they can see a doctor the whole year. The people line up beginning at daybreak, Forté said, and the team treats them until sundown.

These people are "poor as hell," Forté said. "Some children were malnourished. This is just like Africa."

Forté and others are part of a growing trend among college students to go on what's called the alternative spring break, hoping to use their week away from school to make a difference. About 60 CU students spent spring break helping to rebuild hurricane-ravaged Biloxi, Miss, said CU spokeswoman Jeanne Malmsbury. Others built houses in Mexico or helped disadvantaged youth in Houston, or a woman's shelter in Kansas City.

"It was definitely an eye-opener for me and eliminated a lot of stereotypes," said Brie Sampson, a coordinator for the Alternative Breaks program at CU. "It takes a lot of person-to-person interaction and that is something I became very comfortable in doing."

The tradition of alternative spring break is growing at CU. Last month the university was one of three in the U.S. to receive a 2007 Presidential Award for General Community Service, Malmsbury said.

Forté has traveled to Nicaragua twice now with the pre-med students. They help the professional doctors by taking blood pressure, temperature and sorting the patients into the most critical cases.

"We are there to be exposed to it and gain from the doctors," Forté said.

The trips are expensive and Forté and the others ask for grants and donations to help pay for the medicines. The students pay for their own airfare and food.

There is also the language barrier. Some of the students have taken Spanish classes, but they still need translators. It's important to fully understand the patient, Forté said, otherwise you can end up doing more harm than good.

While Forté is said he's proud that he can help, there is also frustration. The group can only do so much, and the need is often overbearing.

Many of the villagers have common problems -- arthritis, heart and lung problems -- that come with working outside on a small farm. Many others suffer from malaria and malnutrition.

"We are putting a band aid that doesn't stick that well to a gash," Forté said.

But there are also victories. Last year they found a child who had pneumonia. The team managed to find transportation and get the boy to a hospital. If the medical team had not been there, it's likely the boy would have died, Forté said.

"I get the opportunity to expose myself to a world otherwise I would not see," Forté said.

"That is really, really cool."

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