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A Healing Journey

After graduation, Liz Maurer '07 traveled to Amazon jungles on a mission of hope.



Maurer poses with two new friends she made this past summer. Both are students at one of seven schools in the Amazon jungle built and supported by Ray of Hope ministries.

of a mission team sponsored by Ray of Hope ministries.

Ray of Hope is an organization founded in 2003 to meet the physical, educational and spiritual needs of children in Brazil's Amazon region.

“Having a chance to be involved with medical care was an exciting opportunity for me,” says Maurer, who started medical school at the University of Illinois this fall.

The team divided its time between the cramped, smoggy industrial city of Manaus and the deceptively placid beauty of the Amazon.

In Manaus, Maurer worked in the favelas, or shanty towns, “which are known for problems with crime, sewage and poor hygiene,” she says.

In the isolated villages of Brazil's rain forest, the need was just as great. “When we set up clinics in the villages, the line of people seemed to multiply as the day went on and news spread throughout the jungle that a doctor was visiting,” she says.

The most common illnesses Maurer and the Ray of Hope team treated stemmed from bacterial infections, parasites and vitamin deficiencies.

“At times, I wished I could do more to help the people,” she says. “I also got excited as I contemplated the different ways that I may someday use my medical degree to serve others.”

After the sun has slipped over the lush canopy of trees and the last light has faded from the glassy water of the Amazon, the alligators emerge. And the hunters are waiting.

“We'd take a small boat out and one of the experienced jungle guides who traveled with us would shine a flashlight along the banks of the river,” says Liz Maurer '07, who spent the summer in Brazil. “Seeing the orange, glowing eyes of an alligator just a few feet from the boat was a little scary.”

Piranha hunting is a little bit different.

“To attract the fish, you beat the water with the pole, in order to appear as though an animal is thrashing or struggling in the water,” Maurer says. “The piranhas that we caught were fairly small, but their teeth were another story.”

But Maurer, who graduated from Illinois Wesleyan in April, wasn't in Brazil to hunt. She came to heal, as part

While on the Amazon, Maurer lived aboard the Discovery, a boat equipped with a kitchen, running water and electricity. The team slept in hammocks hung from the roof. On the open-sided boat, the water was always only feet away.

“Sunrises on the Amazon are absolutely breathtaking,” Maurer says. “Early in the morning, the water is as smooth as glass and serves as a mirror to reflect the beautiful landscape of the jungle and the clouds in the sky.”

Not all of the wildlife Maurer encountered was as intimidating as the piranhas and alligators.

“One morning, while reading and drinking some delicious Brazilian coffee, I heard strange noises that sounded like breathing,” Maurer says. “The noises turned out to be a group of three or four dolphins that were swimming near the boat.”

Maurer says the only downside to the experience was “lots and lots of mosquito bites.”

But, she adds, every mosquito bite was worth it.

“At Terra Preta and Irlanduba, two of my favorite villages, I formed friendships with the children in these areas and was showered with hugs and laughter each time I visited.”

It was in Irlanduba, while bringing food and gifts to poverty-stricken children, that Maurer witnessed what she calls a miracle.

“By the end of our time in the village, we had drawn a crowd of about 30 children,” she says. “I thought that there was no way that we had enough toys for all of them.”

But Nailza and Keith, two of the Ray of Hope workers, kept pulling toys out of a small bag they had brought with them.

“Later on that day, while talking to Nailza, I found out that she had emptied the bag of toys and had given the empty bag to Keith,” Maurer says. “Keith then pulled out toys from the empty bag until every child had one.”

“As she told me this,” Maurer says, “I got goose bumps as I realized the miracle that I had witnessed.”

Maurer and her fellow team members were working toward another kind of miracle: bringing hope to a region devastated by poverty and lack of medical care.

“I hope and pray that through the work of Ray of Hope, these children will have lives with wider possibilities and opportunities,” she says.

Editor’s Note: This profile is adapted from a story by Drew Barringer ’09 that appears on the IWU alumni Web site, www.titanpride.org, where many more alumni profiles are available for viewing.