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Alumna Fights for Women's Rights in Nicaragua

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Alumna Fights for Women's Rights in Nicaragua

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BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – In Nicaragua, 28 percent of all female adolescents are either pregnant or have already given birth—a statistic earning the nation the highest adolescent birth rate in all of Latin America, according to a recent study by the University of Costa Rica School of Public Health.

By providing health information and counseling to the women of Nicaragua through the University of Chicago's Human Rights Internship Program, Erin Bradley, class of 2010, hopes to help change those statistics.



Erin Bradley '10 poses in front of the SexMovil, a mobile educational unit bringing health information to the women of Nicaragua.

"It's really important for social workers to have a human rights lens in the work they do, and it's also important for human rights activists to include social workers and other 'ground-level' personnel in their activism," said Bradley, a Normal native who double majored in history and Hispanic studies during her time at Illinois Wesleyan and is currently working toward her master's degree in Social Service Administration at the University of Chicago. "This internship was the perfect opportunity to blend my career development as a social worker with my growing interest in international human rights causes."

The University of Chicago's Human Rights Internship Program was established in 1998 and has placed more than 200 students with non-governmental organizations, governmental agencies and international bodies around the world by awarding each a \$5,000 stipend for their own human rights project. The selective application process requires an explanation of a serious interest in human rights, description of an ideal experience with a 10-week, fully funded internship and reflection of challenges that might arise and potential solutions for them. According to Bradley, approximately 60 of 120 applicants were selected for interviews, and only 24 received internships.

"The interns are stationed everywhere from Chicago to Kenya to Thailand and are working on a vast array of human rights issues including education, refugee rights, healthcare and economic rights," said Bradley, whose graduate degree follows the school's social administration tract with specific interests in international social welfare, immigration, refugees and domestic violence. "I think I've always had an interest in social justice issues, and now as I'm pursuing a professional degree in social work, I'm starting to develop a human rights perspective on my work with these issues."

Stumbling upon the organization Viva Nicaragua on Idealist.org after securing her internship, Bradley began communicating with the director and found the group offered plenty of opportunities that matched her interests in non-profit and social justice work. Viva Nicaragua was able to coordinate an internship for Bradley at Casa IXCHEN, a women's health organization for which Bradley is currently doing outreach in the areas of sexual and reproductive health, domestic violence and women's rights in general.

"Most of my time is spent in the SexMovil, a mobile health unit that goes to rural areas or communities without a health center," said Bradley, who arrived in Nicaragua on June 16 and will return to the United States on September 7. "We present educational films and short presentations on health topics like STIs, HIV and domestic violence, and we pass out educational materials. We also do HIV testing and provide free contraception."

Because Nicaragua is relatively inexpensive, Bradley's \$5,000 stipend was more than enough to cover the costs of a 12-week trip—and leave a little extra for Bradley's boyfriend and fellow Illinois Wesleyan alumnus, Luke Broholm '10, to accompany her and undertake some human rights work of his own. The Frankfort Square, Ill. native majored in political science during his time at Illinois Wesleyan and is currently studying public interest and labor law at The John Marshall Law School in Chicago.



Luke Broholm '10 works in sports outreach with local Nicaraguan youth.

In Nicaragua for six weeks, Broholm spent his time taking a Spanish course on labor laws and vocabulary, as well as participating in an internship that took him to three different local communities for sports outreach programs with Nicaraguan youth. "Most of us in the United States take our physical education classes for granted," said Bradley. "But the kids here are unbelievably grateful for a chance to participate in some organized physical activity with real sports equipment."

Although she is no longer an Illinois Wesleyan student, Bradley attributes much of her current activity in the human rights realm to what she learned during her undergraduate education, especially in courses like U.S Immigration History with Associate Professor of History and Director of Women's Studies April Schultz, and Race and Ethnic Relations with Assistant Professor of Sociology

Meghan Burke. Most important to her commitment to social justice, Bradley believes, was her experience with Illinois Wesleyan's Action Research Center (ARC).

"Anyone at IWU who has an interest in the non-profit sector, human services or social justice absolutely must get involved with ARC," she said, citing ARC Program Coordinator Deborah Halperin as an "incredible resource" and involvement with ARC as the "single biggest factor" in preparing her for life post-graduation. "The knowledge I gained from Deborah has definitely put me ahead of the curve in my master's degree program, even though I am one of the youngest students and one of the few that came straight from undergrad. The hard skills and overall philosophy I gained from my ARC experiences have been incredibly useful."

Those hard skills have certainly come in handy in Nicaragua, where Bradley feels she and Broholm have accomplished much to be proud of. "We both get to see the immediate impact of the work we do in the faces of the children who get to play soccer for a few hours, or the women who receive vital health information from us," she said. "Many of the communities we work in are desperately poor, but the people there make sure we are comfortable, offer us food from their families and express their gratitude for the services we bring them. Most of the people we work with are incredibly grateful for what we're doing."

"I'm not sure either of us will recognize the full impact of our respective experiences until we've been back in the U.S. for a while," added Bradley. "But as of right now I would say our biggest lessons have been learning that U.S. foreign policy has an unbelievably profound and lasting impact in Latin America, and that motivated people can make a big impact even with few resources."

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