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Mallika Kavadi
Illinois Wesleyan University

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June 20, 2013

Byrne on Santo Domingo Beach

BLOOMINGTON, Ill.— Set in Nicaragua— a country known for its lakes and volcanoes— Fuego y Agua, is a race for a cause that seeks to give back to the island in exchange for good memories and an enriching experience. The race is run on the Ometepe Island, on a route encompassing beaches, trails and the climb and descent of the Maderas volcano. Maggie Byrne '11 experienced this adventure, when she completed a rigorous ultramarathon on a scenic route, overlooking tropical birds and howler monkeys.

A cross-country runner at Illinois Wesleyan University, Byrne from Chicago, graduated summa cum laude with an educational studies major with a double minor in English and Spanish. She is now a Peace Corps volunteer and works as an environmental educator in Nicaragua.



She got involved in the race when a fellow Peace Corps volunteer, who had helped organize the ultramarathon, invited Byrne and her co-workers to sign up. Byrne ran the 50-kilometer ultramarathon with a 10-kilometer ascent and 10-kilometer descent of the volcano. Byrne faced some logistical difficulties in getting proper training in a rural area, however, she put in many hours of training in the high heat of the day, which included a few 20-kilometer runs to the nearest town. Byrne said, "Though I probably only ran there twice, I am still known in the town for having run 'All the way to Rio Grande,' and kids ask me almost weekly, when I am going to do that again."

Byrne's cross-country training at IWU helped her to prepare for the ultramarathon. She applied IWU's Head Cross Country Coach and Instructor in Physical Education Gregory Huffaker's hill workouts, as her guide. "I tried to do some hill training in preparation for my white whale: Maderas Volcano," said Byrne, "doing three sets of four hard push ups the biggest hill I could find. I could hear everytime I reached the top, Coach Huff shouting, 'Turn and burn!'"

Byrne finished the race in nine hours and 33 minutes, coming in 10th position among the women. "It felt a level of energy I never imagined possible," she said.

Completing the ultramarathon was not the only goal on Byrne's agenda. Her main task as an environmental educator in Nicaragua is to work in primary schools to train teachers in participatory, hands-on teaching methods and to teach environmental awareness. She currently co-teaches in one pure-grade small town elementary school and one multi-grade rural school. In town she works with seven teachers from third through sixth grade and in the rural areas, with mixed fourth, fifth and sixth grade classes.

"Because my primary assignment is teacher training, a huge part of my work is weekly co-planning of every lesson. We work on setting concrete achievable goals, planning interactive lessons for different learning styles, and valid assessments of progress. Then, we co-teach the lessons focusing on critical thinking, reading, experiments, practical experiences and educational games," said Byrne.

Byrne also works with planting gardens in the primary schools and at the high school, as part of a nationally mandated focus on food security. In addition, she oversees two clubs: an arts and crafts club and a "Good Readers" club.

Through an outside grant, Byrne also works to build improved environmentally friendly cook-stoves and ovens in the community. The project is aimed at increasing the quality of life while protecting the environment. In Nicaragua, the majority of all daily cooking is done over wood-burning stoves. In order to cut down the negative impacts involved with wood-burning stoves, the Peace Corps trained Byrne and other volunteers to make an improved model, which burns 75 percent less wood. The traditional stoves do not have chimneys, which trap the smoke inside the house. According to the World Health Organization, nearly two million people around the world die prematurely from illness attributable to indoor air pollution caused by such stoves. To solve this problem the improved stoves have a chimney, unlike traditional stoves, that helps the smoke escape the house.

Byrne teaching 6th grade students



Byrne with an eco-stove she built



According to Byrne, "The great part about the improved stoves is that they are economically accessible, easily built and culturally relevant. The stoves allow people to contribute to their own better health and that of the environment, without obliging them to give up their identity or traditions."

Byrne knew early on that she wanted to get involved with the Peace Corps, "I have been sure I wanted to volunteer since my junior year of high school.

Raised with a strong social-justice conscience, a love for culture, passion for teaching and a strong desire to push my limits, I was naturally drawn to the type of experience the Peace Corps offers, in order to become a stronger better-informed global citizen."

Contact: Mallika Kavadi'15 (309) 556-3181, univcomm@iwu.edu