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IWU Nursing Grad Had Hands-On Education in Nicaragua

BLOOMINGTON, Ill. – “I could totally do that,” Angel Arroyo of Chicago, a 2006 graduate of Illinois Wesleyan University’s School of Nursing, remembers thinking as he watched a nurse care for a newborn baby at a hospital where he was visiting a friend.

Inspired by what he had seen, Arroyo transferred from the Military Institute in Lexington, Va., to Illinois Wesleyan in January of 2003. Little did he know that his nursing education at IWU would ultimately lead him to Nicaragua, where, at make-shift clinics, he would distribute antibiotics by the Ziplock bag’s full to needy families.

In February of 2006, Arroyo joined a group of volunteers from Bloomington’s Wesley United Methodist Church as they embarked on their annual mission trip to the Central American nation. Donna Hartweg, director of the School of Nursing, is a member of the church and suggested that Arroyo, who was born in Mexico and is bilingual, join the team. The trip required him to miss a week of class, but delivered invaluable hands-on experience.

Throughout the week in Nicaragua, the volunteers, including a doctor, physician’s assistant, nurse anaesthetist and nurse practitioner, held clinics at various sites, including a city dump, where they performed physical examinations and distributed medicines to orphans and families.

Local ministers announced to their congregations ahead of time that the mission team would be coming, and distributed forms, one per person in a family, listing all the available medications that the volunteers would provide. At the clinics, families lined up, papers in hand. After each examination, a volunteer marked the necessary antibiotics on the list and sent the patient to the pharmacy team where he or she received the indicated medicines.

“We already had Spanish labels on the medications, and I made sure the patients knew how to use them,” Arroyo said of his daily clinic work with the pharmacy team. “Especially with inhalers or with antibiotics, where they have to finish the whole course of medication.”

Detailed planning for the trip began in the fall of 2005. Divided into teams, the group split the responsibility of tasks, such as writing letters to ask for donations of materials and planning activities to do with children at the orphanages they visited.

In February, the team flew to Managua, the capital of Nicaragua, and then traveled seven hours by school bus to Jinotega, the site of the orphanage where they stayed.

“There were little kids filling in potholes along the road,” Arroyo remembered of the drive. “They do this so that drivers will give them tips.” However, a seasoned mission trip veteran warned him that at night the children shoveled the dirt back out of the potholes in order to re-fill them each day.

According to Arroyo, this behavior, learned so young by street children, mirrors the biggest problem facing the nation: attempts to improve education and health care and reduce poverty in Nicaragua have been undermined by corruption. However, as a volunteer with the Wesley mission team, Arroyo helped to fill in some of these figurative potholes for good.

Arroyo, who graduated from IWU in April, will begin work in the trauma unit of Loyola hospital in Chicago this August. Although he is beginning a new phase of his life, Arroyo’s experience in Nicaragua has permanently colored his perception of the nursing field. When he accepted the job offer, Arroyo immediately asked his prospective employers if the hospital sponsored any volunteer trips.

“The hospital has “Doctors Without Borders,” and they need nurses to help out,” he said. Making such a trip would mean sacrificing a week of his allotted vacation time. However, after his life-changing experience in Nicaragua, Arroyo said he knows that he “could totally do that.”