

Mission Trips and the Mission of Marist School

by Joel Konzen, SM

For nearly three decades, Marist School students have participated in both international and domestic mission trips, accompanied by members of the school faculty. These have become important opportunities for the young people at the suburban Atlanta school to learn about cultures and needs greatly different from their own.

Mrs. Karen Shanahan, Director of Community Service at Marist since 1984, began the tradition of student mission trips in the mid-1980s. They began with trips of just a few days to the Texas border or to New Orleans. Eventually some became weeklong or longer, and they grew to include trips to Honduras, El Salvador, Kenya, Jamaica, Peru, Nicaragua, Taiwan, Kentucky, Mississippi, San Francisco, and West Virginia. Despite the expansion of locales, the central purpose and focus of the trips have not changed. It was Karen Shanahan's hope that students from a highly-structured, relatively well-off school community could go beyond the required service experiences at the school and get to know the lives of people in different areas whose experiences were markedly different from their own.

Says Karen about these experiences: "It's important for our students to get away from their environment at some point, where they have access to many conveniences and keep a privileged pattern of life, and to come face to face with people in so many other circumstances. I have seen the students adapt, over and over again, to the different context, once you put away your cell phone and concentrate on what someone else is telling you or showing you. I want them to put themselves in someone else's shoes and to see what that is like. Of course, students go to new places naively thinking they are bringing salvation somehow, and they leave realizing that the trip has been about their learning some humility and solidarity."

For an upcoming trip to Nicaragua over the 2018 spring break, during which Marist School will partner with the volunteer association Amigos for Christ, Karen has a list of more than 50 who have expressed



Above: Marist students with students from Colegio San Jose in Peru

Below: Nick Paschetto in Nicaragua

a desire to go. She can take only about 14. She says that students drop in frequently to remind her that they would really love to participate. Having accompanied a group of students on that trip to Nicaragua several years ago, I can say that Karen's design of the trips is part of what makes for the level of interest. There is always ample time for reflection fitted into the prayer and social slots at the beginning and end of each day. Students begin to share about the impact that the trip is having on them and how their impressions are now quite different from what they had expected they would be feeling.

Junior Isabella Ares said recently, "I went to Peru over the summer, and I have never been so transformed by an experience before. Ever since I came back, I have suddenly had less of a desire to want things I do not need, because my exposure to the situation of others has put my life into perspective." Another junior, Caroline Ross, expressed something similar: "This short week of joy and love helped shape me into a person who could appreciate the little things in life more and understand the true beauty of life and God's creation. The people of Nicaragua taught me to live a life of pure happiness, acceptance, and simplicity."



"Through the experience, I was inspired to a call in social justice. I hope to major in public policy in college to shape future solutions to poverty that exists in the United States. I can say undoubtedly that my exposure to social justice (through Amigos for Christ's economic development programs) has led me to this call."

– senior Nick Paschetto, about his mission trip to Nicaragua

Karen Shanahan noted that when a trip has a Marist connection of some sort—working with the Marist Missionary Sisters in Jamaica or visiting a Marist school in Peru, for instance—the experience is even richer for the students because they get to see yet another dimension of the worldwide mission of Marist religious and their associates. She adds that trips might vary in their objectives. The trips to Peru are more about being present to people in a variety of situations: ministering with Mother Teresa’s Missionaries of Charity, visiting cancer patients and the elderly, or talking with the victims of human trafficking. The Nicaragua experience, on the other hand, usually involves working with young children and physical work on an improvement to a school or community facility.

Marist faculty members who make the trips find themselves busy managing the details of transportation, work schedules, and the items that they might be bringing to the site. But they, too, take part in the group reflection and often voice their appreciation for the large and small revelations that can happen in the mission context.

Karen Shanahan smiles as she says, “Some students are so taken with the experience in Nicaragua that they go back for weeks in the summer. And those who know some Spanish will often really concentrate on becoming fluent, once they’ve been able to use the language to connect with the people in Peru or Nicaragua.” Clearly, the reality of ministering and being ministered to is alive for Marist School students who take the plunge into the mission experience.



Marist student Mike Biando with a young friend at Colegio San Jose in Peru