

St. Peter's Church Mission Trip Experiences Honduras Firsthand

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On a Saturday morning in mid-July, I tapped lightly on Anne and Steve Peacher's front door in Weston. It was 3:30 a.m., and the pre-dawn darkness matched my uncertainty about what lay ahead. Two sleepy teens tumbled out the door, and in whispers we loaded the van. Then we left for Logan Airport to join our work team for our flight to Miami. Final destination: Tegucigalpa, Honduras.

Steve Peacher, 15-year-olds Nick Peacher and Nicky Packs, and I were headed to "El Hogar," a residential school for desperately poor children for a week of work, play and observation.

Our duffels held steel-toe work boots and jeans, snacks to supplement what we had heard might be meager rations, coffee to share each morning, and boxes of curriculum books that would be difficult to ship.

I had some concerns about safety and health, but I wanted very much to see firsthand a place I had heard about for many years. "El Hogar," short for El Hogar de Amor y Esperanza, "The Home of Love and Hope," was founded in 1979 with five little boys off the streets of Tegucigalpa.



The work team at "El Hogar," a residential school for poor children, along with a student sponsored by St. Peter's Church

The Outreach Committee of St. Peter's Church in Weston learned about the project shortly after its inception and has been providing financial support for more than 20 years. We have exchanged letters with boys we sponsored and sent baseball gear. When a representative of the school preached at St. Peter's and mentioned work team visits, parishioner Rosanne Iacono said, "We've got to do this."

Last July, St. Peter's sent its fifth work team to El Hogar. Of this year's team (10 youths and five adults), half were making repeat visits. Iacono went for the fifth time and was accompanied by daughter Alyssa, a Weston High School senior, making her third visit.

Our mission was to gain an appreciation for life at El Hogar and in Honduras and to assist with the construction of a concrete-block dormitory.

From Miami we flew to San Pedro Sula, because the Tegucigalpa airport was closed following a plane crash in May. After clearing immigration we met the Rev. Richard Kunz, El Hogar Projects executive director, and Raul Castro, work team coordinator. We squeezed into two vans and traveled the national highway south to Tegucigalpa.

The five-hour drive introduced us to the beauty of Honduras, its steep, green mountains, alluvial valleys, and copper-colored soil. The simplicity of life was evident in the small dwellings, crops tucked into tiny hillside plots, and roadside commerce. The Honduran people walked along the highway; rode bikes, burros and horses; and got their aging trucks up one hill after another.

When it began to rain we saw the danger and difficulty as amber runoff surged down the mountainsides. Rain soaked laundry draped on wire fences and turned everything to mud. Kunz told us that the rains often wash away poorly constructed dwellings.

El Hogar Projects in Honduras comprises three residential schools for 230 boys, and since January 2007, 10 little girls. El Hogar, the elementary/middle school, is located on a 3-acre site in the capital city. Originally a farm, it is now surrounded by commercial and residential development. From the visitors cabin, we could hear roosters crowing and trucks rumbling outside the main gate.

For grades 7 to 9, boys attend The Episcopal Agricultural School in the countryside where they study sustainable agriculture and animal husbandry. Or they can study to become welders, carpenters and electricians at the Santa Maria Technical School located in the Amerateca Valley. When they graduate from grade 9, the boys have a Honduran high school diploma and trade school certificate. Most find employment, and some go on to complete two years of private high school and then to university while working. These are stunning achievements although they would be normal expectations for our youth.

Honduras is the second poorest country in Central America. There is an emerging middle class, evidenced by the shopping mall, modern hardware store, and townhouse neighborhoods we saw, but much of the population suffers from illiteracy and unemployment. Families cannot feed, clothe or educate their children and have no way to break out of such desperate circumstances.



St. Peter's work team puts in a full day taking nails from salvaged boards.

“Our mission is to change the world one child at a time,” says El Hogar director Claudia de Castro, “and so we take the poorest of the poor into our school family.”

Our work assignments included mixing concrete by hand, moving concrete blocks, and de-nailing and moving piles of salvaged lumber. We observed math, science and Spanish classes and watched the youngest children audition to represent El Hogar in a regional singing competition. On Limpera Day (Honduran Independence Day) we participated in a demonstration of tribal life at the technical school. Most important, we played with the children whenever their schedule permitted. Basketball, football toss, tag, hopscotch, coloring books, and “Uno” were favorites.

As I watched the boys run and jump to cries of “champion,” I wondered where else in Honduras or in suburban Boston children were playing with abandon. Our comfortable neighborhoods are often quiet as kids complete homework, watch television and sit at the computer.

The children of El Hogar live complex lives. Many come malnourished and mistreated to this new home where they receive three meals a day and a clean bunk, clothing and shoes, showers and haircuts, medical and dental care, and schooling. School directors support them as they reconcile the difficult circumstances of their family life with the opportunities they now have.

El Hogar is a mission of the Episcopal Diocese of Honduras. Children are taught that this abundance comes from God and the generosity of people like their work team visitors. “I was surprised by how the kids handled themselves,” Nicky Peacher said. “You really wouldn’t know where they were from unless you got to see a home site.”

On a rainy afternoon, we visited one boy’s home several blocks from school and met his mother. Her one-room dwelling was perched on a terrace reached by a slippery ladder missing several rungs.

“I often think of her going to bed with no electricity, running water or toilet in the home, and knowing that in the morning nothing will have changed,” says Iacono. “How much we take for granted.”

St. Peter’s work team also included Cullen Corley, Eliza Truscott and Jennifer Truscott of Weston and Maggie Tyler-Rubenstein and Chloe Rubenstein of Wayland. Work team visits are coordinated by El Hogar Ministries Inc. in Winchester (www.elhogar.org).

One child at a time, El Hogar equips Honduras’s poorest children to take a place in the middle class, to be able to support their families and live with dignity. We left El Hogar one week after we arrived, rising before dawn but not before the neighborhood roosters.

“I expected poverty like what I had seen in inner-city Boston,” said Nicky Packs, “but that is nothing like what we saw in Honduras. Our worked helped, but the trip was about getting inspired to do more.”