DePaul’s Global Brigades: Travel with a Mission

By Marilyn Ferdinand

For most of us, travel provides us with a chance to relax and a firsthand way to explore other lands. While travel broadens our view of the world, few of us make truly life-altering decisions based on a trip out of the country. But don’t tell that to the DePaul students who give their time and talents to Global Brigades (GB), a student-founded, student-run organization that seeks to create positive change globally. Not only are these students helping to change the world for others, but they are also moving their lives in directions many never imagined.

Since the founding of GB in 2004, tens of thousands of university students and professionals from Canada, Germany, Ireland, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States have worked to improve living conditions in four under-resourced partner countries—Ghana, Honduras, Nicaragua and Panama. The DePaul chapter is one of more than 450 U.S. chapters that collectively mobilize 7,000 volunteers each year to take part in brigades during school breaks. DePaul currently fields nine brigades: architecture, business, dental, environmental, human rights, medical, microfinance, public health and water.

A sustainable perspective

Nikki Tolwin (CSH ’14), a health science major from Glenview, Ill., is a fairly typical brigader. “I was attracted to Global Brigades because I was excited to gain hands-on medical experience,” Tolwin recalls. “I went on my first medical brigade as a freshman intern in June 2011.” That first brigade was a life-changer for Tolwin. “I lived in Honduras for a month,” she says, “conducting my own research on women’s health. I talked to women about their marriages, their daily activities and their views about what they were missing in their lives. This was the first time I finally understood the lives of the people we serve from their perspective. I got to develop GB programs that would give the women what they truly wanted.”

As chapter co-president, Tolwin helps guide program objectives and logistics, fundraising, public relations planning and finances. She also leads the Architecture Brigade, which focuses on large-scale projects, such as building schools and health centers, often in concert with brigades from different universities. Tolwin encourages students to incorporate what they have learned into their worldview: “I attempt to inspire reflective discussion so that the ideas of sustainable and holistic development stick with them when they come back to the U.S.”

Tolwin’s goal to become a surgeon changed after her GB experience. “I realized that to help the largest number of people, I would need to do a lot more than be a surgeon. Though it disappointed many of my family and friends, I decided to focus on healthcare policy and public health. I found that being an advanced practice nurse would give me the most freedom to travel and work in communities and the skills to make ethical healthcare policy. Therefore, I have applied to master’s in nursing programs and plan to work in women’s health.”

The value of connection

Julia Schroeder’s (CMN ’14) life-changing encounter with GB did not cause a shift in her career goals but rather a change in her thinking. The public relations and advertising major began as a freshman volunteer with the Microfinance Brigade in Honduras. Schroeder became interested in GB because “growing up in Germany and having had the privilege to travel, I have always had the urge to immerse...
myself in other cultures.”

The Microfinance Brigade works to provide rural populations with a community banking and loan system and financial literacy programs to foster a culture of savings and growth. Students design educational workshops for adults and children and provide consultation and one-on-one budget workshops. The goals are to help families achieve financial independence and provide the community with a strong, communal financial foundation.

Now the program director of the Microfinance Brigade, Schroeder asserts that “these trips have taught me how to connect with people. Since I do not speak Spanish, I had to build relationships without using simple means of communication. These trips have helped me value the importance of human relationships and truly getting to know your target audience, which tend to be forgotten in a world dominated by online culture.”

A chance to lead

College of Communication student Teresa Nguyen heard about GB from peers and the DePaul Office of Student Involvement Fair. Her first trip, in August 2013, was to Nicaragua with a hybrid Public Health–Medical Brigade. Nguyen says, “Five other university brigades were working in our area, and it was really cool to see that community.” Other universities match majors to the brigade, “but at DePaul, all majors are involved in all brigades,” Nguyen explains.

As with every brigade, Nguyen received advance and on-site training. She says, “I had to learn how to take a temperature and blood pressure. Experienced brigaders shared their knowledge.” That knowledge included how to be part of a brigade. “I didn’t know anyone in my group, and I found another family within my DePaul family,” says Nguyen. “We got close with our in-country staff, especially our interpreter. He started calling us the ‘Grey’s Anatomy’ team. He called me ‘Dr. Yang,’” Nguyen says with a laugh.

Following this experience, Nguyen applied to lead a brigade. “DePaul’s chapter offers a wide range of leadership opportunities for students. I was made a leader after going on just one brigade.” She led the Environmental Brigade to Panama this past spring. “We partnered with Northwestern University and the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign to build greenhouses from start to finish. We also traveled to rural communities and schools to teach workshops on the ecosystem, biodiversity and the water cycle.”

Growth through human connection

Nguyen was moved by the Nicaraguan adults she met during her first brigade. “They really trusted us to take care of their children when they were going through the clinic. The human connection—nothing can be more powerful.” After her first GB experience, Nguyen changed her major from public relations and advertising to intercultural communication, and intends to stay connected to GB through its postgraduate program. “Our university is based on Vincentian values, and Global Brigades really ties into that. It reinforces that we help our friends everywhere, not just in our country,” Nguyen says.

Schroeder’s most memorable experience occurred during her 2012 trip to the Honduran community of Pajarillos. “As we got to know the members in charge of the community caja (fund), we were introduced to its president, who did not know how to read and write. The majority of us were quite skeptical of his abilities to structure a financial environment, but Santos surprised us all,” Schroeder says. “I have never met a man so incredibly kind, motivated and intelligent,” Schroeder continues. “For us, teaching Santos and the team how to add, subtract and keep books seemed rather simple, but to him, it meant everything. By the end of the week, he summoned the community to recite a beautiful prayer thanking us for our dedication to his community. This moment still brings tears to my eyes.”

Tolwin, an enthusiastic GB promoter, counts two special people among her recruits. She convinced her dentist parents to accompany her on a Dental Brigade. “They were very skeptical about my first trip,” she says. “When I came back raving about how Global Brigades had changed me, they were convinced. Having my parents, who are generally very focused on American values and individuality, use their talents to serve people who truly needed them showed me that Global Brigades can change your point of view at any time in life.”