

Service Learning as a Transformative Tool



The Jessie F. Richardson Foundation

Across Generations.

Across Borders.



2010 Portland State University Clinic Team helping a Nicaraguan elder.

Nearly ten years ago, The Jessie F. Richardson Foundation's (JFR) president, Dr. Keren Brown Wilson, saw a picture of an elderly woman being taken to a clinic in a wheelbarrow. When she asked about the picture, Dr. Martha Pelaez, then head of the Pan American Health Organization's section for Elders in Latin America, said, "Let me take you to see conditions for elders in Nicaragua." After visiting Nicaragua, the 2nd poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, several times, Keren thought about how JFR could do more. Keren described a plan to her board to create an initiative that would address immediate needs, build capacity, and create sustainable solutions to support indigent elders. It was a great idea, but quite overwhelming given JFR's limited resources.

One of the biggest difficulties that the JFR Foundation was faced with was how to allow the resources that we had to go as far as they possibly could? We had to get others involved in this vision that had begun to develop in the mind of Dr. Wilson. The first group that came to mind was that of college students. During this period in the lives of many college students, they are trying to figure out exactly where they fit in this world, and how it is that they view it. If JFR could create a life altering, or defining, trip for these young people, then perhaps more and more of them would devote themselves to this issue of Global Aging, especially in the developing world. Also, if we wanted to create change, we had to first create the opportunity for a paradigm shift.

With this in mind, Keren Wilson approached two Deans at Portland State University in 2002. They were Marvin Kaiser of the College of Liberal Arts and Sciences, and Larry Wallack of the College of Urban and Public Affairs. They were immediately interested and asked for Keren to formulate a plan to get their students involved in her vision. So she approached

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Margaret Neal, Director of the Institute on Aging at PSU, who was also quite intrigued and asked, “When do you want to do this?” Keren’s immediate reply was, “Next term!” The two of them then got to work, creating what they hoped would be that paradigm shifting experience, and the next year, the first nine students from PSU took the plunge and headed to Nicaragua. Since that first trip, more than 100 students from Portland State University have had the opportunity to experience the 2nd poorest nation in the Western Hemisphere. The groups that have gone down to Nicaragua from PSU have involved majors in Gerontology, Community Health, Urban Planning, Social Work, Engineering, Biology, Spanish, and other disciplines.

Alan DeLaTorre, first a student with the program at PSU and now a faculty member in the Institute on Aging, has been with JFR since the very beginning of our Service Learning trips. “I have had the tremendous opportunity to grow from being a student within the program to a coordinator and traveling faculty member. The service-learning model that remains central to the PSU program has brought together two important aspects for each group that has traveled to Nicaragua: first, we are able to engage in projects that have a tangible outcomes, like the bottle house and raised-bed garden projects; second, the capacity building that occurs over time with our Nicaraguan partners aims to sustain positive community growth through education, training and awareness. Overall, I am able to see the results of both types of projects and I believe that they both have incredible value to the Nicaraguan communities that we are serving, and the students who are traveling to Nicaragua each year.”

The students have had the opportunity to work in places known as hogares, or assisted living homes for the elderly, as well as hospitals and smaller health clinics. They have been able to build structures, educate and treat the sick, and create lasting partnerships in the various communities in which they have worked. Each year students in health related majors have led training for professional caregivers who work in the hogares and collected information for the Ministry of Health of Nicaragua. Engineering majors have had the opportunity to partner with Engineers Without Borders as well as local contractors and architects on multiple building projects such as the construction of water towers with a capacity of 10,000 liters and a house made from 1-liter plastic bottles filled with sand. They were also able to reinforce the roof of one of the hogares to help it stand up to the storms of the rainy season and the earthquakes that plague the Central American country. Students have created documents in Spanish that will continue to teach elders about how to better care for themselves, stressing the issues of chronic illness and preventative health. These students have done a wonderful job of building capacity, teaching elders to better care for themselves, as well as create sustainable solutions to supporting the indigent elders of Nicaragua..



Concordia student dancing with a member of the Elder Social Club in Managua, Nicaragua



In 2006, we had the opportunity to add another school to the JFR family: Pacific University. Amber Black, a student who had been one of those first nine students from PSU in 2003, was a graduate student at Pacific University and proposed a similar project there. The students from Pacific also went on to work in the hogares, but as medical consultants. Majors such as Occupational Therapy, Physical Therapy, Dental, Physicians Assistant, Pharmacy and Optometry (through the Amigos program) have all been represented on their trips. The faculty is so dedicated to the country that they come back year after year to lead these trips and get as many students involved as possible. This winter, Tiffany Boggis, an Occupational Therapy professor will be spending a large chunk of her sabbatical in Nicaragua doing research and working on her Spanish. Tiffany has greatly appreciated the trips and their impacts on Pacific University students saying that, "Participation in the Nicaragua project is a tremendous learning experience for health professional students at Pacific University. Students report improved ability to work in an interprofessional team, greater understanding of how to coordinate community resources and greater interest in volunteerism to promote social justice for marginalized populations." This December we will be taking 19 Pacific students from four different disciplines down to work with our elders.

By 2009, there had become an increased appeal for nurses to come down to Nicaragua to run health clinics. To this end, Keren Wilson turned to Concordia University and their nursing program. Concordia has a very strong emphasis on service leadership to transform society, so they seemed to be a promising candidate for this kind of trip. The idea was pitched to President Chuck Schlimpert and by the next summer, a group of Concordia students joined the ranks of service learning students to work with people who were in a state of incredible need.

In the year 2000, there were about 42 million people aged 60 and older in Latin America and the Caribbean. It is estimated that by 2025, that number will increase to just over 100 million. Global Aging is a very serious issue that must be addressed, and soon. By getting these young people involved, this next generation, we can instill in their hearts and minds that an aging population can simply not be forgotten. This will be a problem not only in the developing world, but here in the United States as well. This is why creating those sustainable solutions, especially those that can be replicated outside of Nicaragua, is so important.

One of the most important aspects to doing any kind of work in Latin America is building relationships. Before any kind of task can be accomplished, one has to create something meaningful and lasting. The students who have been traveling down to Nicaragua for the past seven years have done an absolutely amazing job of not only creating personal relationships between themselves and the elders of Nicaragua, but have been ambassadors for JFR, their universities, Oregon and the United States. They have made significant inroads in transforming elder care in one of the poorest nations in the world.

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Without their help, ingenuity and love, it would have been next impossible to accomplish these triumphs.

Melissa Canon, currently a Community Development and Gerontology Doctoral student at PSU, traveled to Nicaragua in 2009 and can attest to the life changing effects that walking into this type of environment can have. "I feel enlightened by the strength and determination of Nicaraguans, and throughout the experience I identified new and unexpected ways that my team was learning from them and helping to serve their communities. I believe that the trip demonstrated the inherent value of a service-learning program and was a reminder to all that even though a program such as this has its inevitable challenges, many opportunities and benefits can be realized with enough effort."

Looking back at these past triumphs, at the JFR Foundation we are very excited for the future. In January 2011, we will be making our first foray into the realm of "Voluntourism" with Portland Community College and Life by Design NW. A combined group of students and non-students will be traveling to Nicaragua to work with the elders and find out how they can better be involved with JFR and its efforts. We are currently working to open up new partnerships with other universities as we expand our focus and activities in Nicaragua. We hope that some of these partnerships will be more business-oriented in order to create programs that can help us to make the homes more sustainable with new and innovative approaches to purposeful profit. Finally, JFR has a vision for bringing universities and non-profits together in a consortium to reach out to other desperately poor locations to bring long-term relationships. With this interdisciplinary approach, resources can go much further and the impact that they can have as a group would greatly outpace anything that they would accomplish on their own.

In 10 years, JFR has worked with 4 universities to send more than 200 students to work with elders abroad. In the coming year, we will be launching a program in the Appalachia area of the United States. If you are interested in partnering with JFR for a service learning program, please contact Keren Brown Wilson at: kwilson@jfrfoundation.org.



PSU Bottle House Project, 2010

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The Jessie F. Richardson Foundation (JFR) is a 501(c)3 private charitable operating organization whose mission is to improve housing and long term care services for older adults, both in the United States and abroad. JFR is committed to approaches that enhance internal capacity and promote sustainable solutions to problems adversely impacting the quality of life of elders.