

JFR/PCC/Life By Design “Voluntourism” Trip to Nicaragua

In January, a wonderful team of adults embarked on a Voluntourism trip to Nicaragua. This trip was a bit of a change for JFR because, historically, our trips have involved students currently enrolled in universities with a service learning focus. This group, however, was comprised of adults connected to Portland Community College, The Jessie F. Richardson Foundation and Life by Design who wanted to work with the elders of Nicaragua, give to those in need, and immerse themselves in the local culture. The team consisted of eleven individuals with backgrounds ranging from nursing to agriculture and engineering to advocacy. The volunteers visited three different *hogares de ancianos*, or elder homes, while in Nicaragua: Jinotepe, Boaco and Juigalpa.

Our projects were numerous and effective. We held clinics for the elders at the various *hogares* in conjunction with our Nicaragua Physician, Milton Lopez. We had construction projects such as installing lights for walkways and hanging doors to finish the Bottle House that was constructed by Portland State University students last summer. The team also poured a much needed new cement sidewalk in Juigalpa. Volunteers led seminars on fall prevention and taught the locals how to effectively advocate for elders in their community. We held exercise classes that included even the most immobile elders, so they were able to participate from their seats or wheelchairs.

One of the most important things that we did was to simply spend time with the elders. This is a culture where people thrive with physical contact and interaction, so to see the elders' faces light up with the joyfulness brought on through a hug or conversation allowed us to truly feel the meaning and purpose of our hard work.

Of course, being a Voluntourism trip, the group got to take some time out to enjoy the sights and wonders of the country of lakes and volcanoes. We got to take a very bumpy ride up the side of Mombacho Volcano to see a magnificent view of the colonial city of Granada, the great Lagoon de Apoyo, and the largest lake in Nicaragua, Lake Cocibolca. We also spent time in Granada to simply enjoy the country as well as reflect upon the emotional impact that working in a country as poor as Nicaragua can have on a person.

For the Jessie F. Richardson Foundation, these kinds of trips are seen as capacity building. Through education, construction and care, these elder homes are better able to care and sustain themselves. Many of them are constantly running a deficit because they lack government funding and are forced to carry on simply with what can be donated by their surrounding communities which, in the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere, can be truly scant. This is why, with the help of volunteer and service learning groups, the *hogares* can build their capacity so that, one day soon, they will fully be able to sustain themselves.