

## SERVICE-LEARNING PROJECT BRINGS SMILES *by Janis Farr, ESP Coordinator*

What do you get when you combine the rich personal growth opportunity of service-learning with the adventure of study abroad? If you ask Debbie Batson, Dental Hygiene Program Director at TCC, she will tell you that the result is one of the most exciting, rewarding experiences that students and their instructors will ever have. And if you think you need a second opinion, just ask any of Batson's five students about the recent trip their Dental Hygiene Service-Learning class took to Chacreseca, Nicaragua.

In May, Batson and her students traveled to Nicaragua where their mission was to provide dental health education and other services to the underserved population living in and around the community of Chacreseca. Arrangements for the trip were coordinated by Dr. Doug Price, TCC's Dean of Global Education. Leslie Penrose, Executive Director of JustHope and her staff organized on-site support for the group in Chacreseca. JustHope is a 501c3 not-for-profit organization based in Tulsa and "dedicated to global understanding and sustainable development," according to [www.justhope.org](http://www.justhope.org).

Nicaragua is one of the poorest nations in the western hemisphere, and where the team was to perform its services, most of

the people had never seen a dentist or heard of a dental hygienist. Only one local dentist practiced in the nearby city of Leon—Dr. Marcelo Sampson—and he accompanied the group each day as they worked.

During the week they were in Nicaragua, the service-learning team left their home base each morning by 7:00 a.m. to travel by van to their destinations. Tubs of dental instruments from TCC and boxes of donated supplies that Batson and her students collected from generous donors in and around Tulsa were brought on the trip from Oklahoma.



*Dr. Sampson examines a patient in a school room being used by the service-learning team.*

Every day at a new location, large groups of eager patients waited to receive a toothbrush, dental floss, and education about how to use them. Children received a fluoride varnish administered by the service-learning students, and the team scaled the teeth of many of the people they saw. In the evening when they returned to their base, all of the used instruments were taken to Dr. Samp-

son's office where they were sterilized overnight in a solution and made ready for the next day's work.



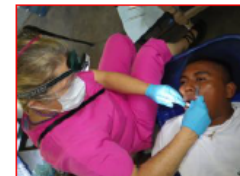
*Amanda Randolph, Ellen Reynolds, and Molly Metrailler scale teeth of patients in LaFlor, Nicaragua*

Batson's students learned to work and thrive in an environment where not even some of the most basic necessities exist. Fresh running water was not available, so students wiped out the mouths of each patient they treated. The service-learning team usually set up their workspace in a local school since it was the only building in each location able to accommodate them. None of the team was fluent in Spanish; local interpreters accompanied them wherever they went.

Patients and team members alike sat in any chairs that happened to be on hand at the sites as the students worked. Usually the only adequate light for the workers came from the headlamps worn on their foreheads. Students who had completed their first year in the program told Batson that they could never be intimidated by anything that happened in

their future clinical experiences. They now had confidence that they could handle any problem.

Batson's eyes light up as she talks about the impact that this service-learning experience had on her students and on her as a faculty member. "There is no way to explain it," she said. "I came back a different person; I am more accepting and tolerant and more thankful of what we have. We walked away with more than we left."



*"We walked away with more than we left," says instructor Debbie Batson (above) of her class's experience in Nicaragua.*

In her reflections about the trip, service-learning student Ellen Reynolds wrote, "I learned so much on this trip to Nicaragua, more than I could have ever imagined.... I learned...it is not just the service we provided; it is the fact that we cared enough to even show up. I love how we were so welcomed!"

Another student, Amanda Randolph, said,

(See *SMILES*, page 6)

## SMILES (continued from page 5)

"The service trip to Nicaragua was amazing.... Everyone that I saw, no matter what they were doing, or how 'bad' things may have been for them, offered a smile and a greeting. The people were definitely my favorite part of the experience."



Amy Beckman and Brad Enis (an O.U. nursing student) work with a patient.

And Amy Beckman wrote in her reflections, "The Dental Hygiene trip to Nicaragua was an experience that I will never forget.... I hope that I have shared an experience with them, as they have impacted my life and

changed it forever. The appreciative smile on the children's faces of Matalpa, for receiving a simple toothbrush, will be a memory that burns in my thoughts forever. I am so appreciative of this opportunity...."

Leslie Penrose of JustHope says that the team's van driver had his teeth cleaned, too, and he told Penrose that he had never known that brushing his teeth would keep them healthy. "But now," he told her, "I know that if I want to keep my teeth, I have to take care of them. And believe me; I definitely want to keep my teeth!"

A number of other adults who received services gave the same type of testimonials about the work that the team did. All were very appreciative of the generosity, kind-

ness and professionalism of Batson and her students. Several mentioned the enormous benefits to the community of providing a free service that was so badly needed by the people living there.

Dr. Sampson, the Nicaraguan dentist that worked with the group, also had accolades for Batson and her team. He writes that in Nicaragua there are many dental hygiene problems and much dental disease, but there are few resources to help the people living there. Still, "The group was always motivated in spite of the conditions."

In conclusion, Leslie Penrose writes, "There have been other dental and medical teams that have come to this community. But this is the first dental hygiene

group—the first to actually focus on keeping teeth healthy rather than focusing on dealing with the problems. People seemed energized by that—like they had been given a good tool that they could work with. I can't imagine a gift that will have a greater impact on their future!"

Instructors wanting to learn more about how to combine their service-learning class with study abroad may contact Dr. Doug Price, [dprice@tulsacc.edu](mailto:dprice@tulsacc.edu). Please email your service-learning faculty coordinator or Carol Carr, ESP Director, [ccarr@tulsacc.edu](mailto:ccarr@tulsacc.edu) if you would like to get in touch with other TCC instructors who have taken service-learning groups abroad.

## H.S. SHINES IN CHICAGO

The Human Services Program travelled to Chicago in May 2011 for service-learning. Eleven students participated in over 40 hours of service-learning. The sites included Volunteers of America, MaryCrest Village Senior Housing, Chicago Food Pantry, and a residential facility for individuals in transition.

Students interacted with veterans working on resumes and employment services in

the VOA office. Several students gift-wrapped new books for underserved children. Another team of students redesigned a family visitation room for children in foster care. An ambitious team reorganized a clothing closet and sorted donations for children.

The students were amazing and all of the service-learning sites were extremely impressed with the services.

by Dr. Sharolyn Wallace



Dr. Sharolyn Wallace and Dr. Diane Potts organized and managed all of the activities. Next year *Service Learning American Campus-Human Services* will travel to Los Angeles for another great educational opportunity.

At left: Human Services Program service-learning students gather for a photograph in Chicago

### Reference:

Cress, C., Burack, C., Giles, Jr., D., Elkins, J., and Stevens, M. (2010). *A Promising Connection: Increasing College Access and Success through Civic Engagement* [White paper]. Retrieved from <http://www.compact.org/resources-for-presidents/>.