

THE MANY FACES OF HOPE

Students learn life lessons from Casa trip

Lucie Bryar'76*

Technical Writer, Office of College Relations, Rivier College

(From: *Rivier Today*, Spring 2006)

The face of child abuse or neglect is something most of us experience only from afar. We see highly publicized cases in the media, but for the most part, we are able to keep these images a comfortable distance from our hearts and our homes.

This was not true, however, for a group of 15 Rivier College students who spent one week during winter break as volunteers at Casa de Esperanza de los Niños—the House of Hope for Children in Houston. Casa is a safe place for children affected by neglect, abuse, or HIV/AIDS. The organization operates five residential homes, a food and clothing pantry, and a small school. About ten years ago, the Sisters of the Presentation of Mary established a House of Hospitality to support Casa volunteers and each year, Rivier students volunteer there during college breaks. “Our students rake leaves, paint walls, cook, play with the children, do whatever needs to be done,” says Mary Ellen McGuire, director of campus ministry, who coordinates the trip.

Two students kept journals of their December 2005 trip and agreed to share some of their experiences and insights with *Rivier Today*: **Rebecca Coonradt**, a sophomore nursing major from Richmond, Maine, and **Alecia Colassi**, a freshman nursing major from Hollis, New Hampshire.

Day 1

Saturday, December 17, 2005

Rebecca—

We arrived in Houston tonight where we were greeted by Allison Gagne, a Rivier graduate who works for Casa. They took us back to the Sisters’ home where we all ate dinner together and introduced ourselves. After the meal, we came to a Dominican Sisters’ retreat center where we will be staying for the week. We discussed what we might see and experience during our time at Casa and what our own expectations are.

Alecia—

This is my first service trip. I haven’t really worked with abused, neglected, or HIV positive children in the past and I’m not fully sure what to expect. I was told by one of the host mothers that the children living here are from the worst possible situations you can think of. Some have seen killings of family members, others have narrowly escaped being killed themselves.

Day 2

Sunday, December 18, 2005

Rebecca—

Today our group split up; some of us organized and sorted Christmas gifts while others helped one of the houseparents to clean out a garage to make room for more diapers. During the reflection tonight, we discussed the person or experience who had the biggest impact on us. For me, it was seeing Sister Pat's home filled with Christmas gifts for the children of Casa and other children in the community who have very little. Sister Pat's home was filled with gifts...every corner of every room was filled, even her own bed. She never once mentioned getting it cleaned up or where she might eat or sleep; her only focus was getting the gifts organized to distribute to the families.

"You can hear about the kids, but you can't really understand what it's like until you are here holding them," reflected sophomore Rebecca Coonradt in her journal.

"It is amazing to see all the acts of selflessness that come from Casa, even when the staff are struggling to get enough for their own children," wrote sophomore Rebecca Coonradt.

Alecia—

I worked in the clothes pantry today, helping to sort through masses of clothing. While we were there, a car pulled up and dropped off a small girl who was screaming and crying. As the host mother carried her to the house, the little girl was kicking and hitting her. Later, I learned that the girl had just returned from a visitation with her mother and she wanted to stay with her mom but couldn't. I remember being younger and in a situation where I was unable to see one of my parents for a period of time that felt like forever. At first I thought I could relate to this little girl's feelings, but then I realized her situation is far worse. I can't imagine being only five years old and being limited to one-hour visits with your mom. I realized that while I've always been upset about my family being broken by divorce, my life isn't nearly as broken as these children's lives.

Day 3

Monday, December 19, 2005

Rebecca—

We met the founders of Casa today. They told us a story about a baby who had been left at the hospital when he was born. The doctors and nurses told the Casa people that the baby was healthy and just needed a home. After a few days, however, they realized he was not healthy at all. They took him to another doctor who said he was "failing to thrive." They took him home and gave him as much love as they could. The people from Casa told us that little "baby" recently graduated from college and is doing very well.

This afternoon, I watched a seven-month-old boy and a little girl who is almost two years old. You can hear about the kids, but you can't really understand what it's like until you are here holding them.

Copyright © 2006 by Rivier College. All rights reserved.

ISSN 1559-9388 (online version), ISSN 1559-9396 (CD-ROM version).

They all have different stories to tell. Some were abandoned by their parents; some have parents in jail; others have parents who can't provide a place to live. It's difficult to know what to think or how to feel. It's just sad that they do not have the life that most of us take for granted. They are fortunate, though, to be at Casa, where they have great houseparents and nice homes.

Alecia—

I didn't know how I would feel around the children, but I find that they are so innocent and pure and I feel at peace when I am with them. One in particular is my favorite. Her name is Sabrina and I absolutely fell in love with her. She is almost two years old and very smart. When I visited with her today, we read tons of books and played with her toys. We were a good combination. I won't forget the way she smiled and laughed when I tickled her and how she came over to me and sat right in my lap. I'll never understand why Sabrina was neglected.



Sophomore Rebecca Coonradt (above photo, far left) says it's hard to describe the Casa experience. "You have to go there, see the kids and work with the sisters to understand it," she wrote in her journal, excerpted at left. She is shown with student volunteers Matt Blair and Maria Hogan.

Day 4

Tuesday, December 20, 2005

Rebecca—

Today, I worked with two other girls cleaning up the backyard at Allison's house while the kids watched from the window the whole time. Later, while we were sorting through clothing donations, a homeless woman stopped to ask if there was anything she could have. One of the sisters said she isn't supposed to do this, but she gave the woman a few bags of clothing and even a few toys. It is amazing to see all the acts of selflessness that come from Casa, even when the staff are struggling to get enough for their own children.



Freshman Matt Blair helps out with a yard clean-up project.

Alecia—

Angela is a beautiful baby girl. She is so happy and can't stop smiling, especially when someone speaks to her or when she is in her swing. All I can think is that there must be angels floating around her because I've never seen a baby so content. Angela always lights up when her brother comes near her. It reminds me of my brother and how much I love him. I think whenever you are treated badly in this world, if you are lucky enough to have a brother or sister, you have an extra strength.



Freshman Alecia Colassi wrote that her experiences as a Casa volunteer "opened my eyes to a couple of things in life that are really important."

Day 5

Wednesday, December 21, 2005

Rebecca—

Late this afternoon, Maria, Mike, Sister Pat, and I went to deliver some Christmas gifts to a single mom who had seven young girls. Some of the children had once been a part of Casa and were now living with their mother again. When we got out of the van, we walked into a whole different world. There were rows of apartment buildings, two stories high, with just enough room in between for a walkway and a very small yard on each side for the children to play. There were children of all ages running around and a few babies in swings or carriages crying or fussing without anyone paying attention to them. We went to the woman's apartment, where the living room was empty except for a Christmas tree and a couch covered in an old blanket. After being introduced, we returned to the van to get the bags of Christmas gifts. As we walked back up the cement walkway with our gifts, all the kids outside stopped to look. It was horrible to see their faces, knowing they wouldn't be getting these toys and maybe none at all. While it was nice to know we had helped one family to have a happy Christmas, that good feeling went away when I saw the faces of the other children who would not be so lucky this year. I feel horrible knowing that in a few days, I'll be going home where I'll have all kinds of new things I really do not need.

Day 6

Thursday, December 22, 2005

Alecia—

This trip opened my eyes to a couple of things in life that are really important, but can sometimes be hard to learn. I've learned to live and act today, don't hesitate until tomorrow. Laugh when you want to laugh and smile at everyone. Open your heart and be friendly, because life is short; there's no time for bitterness. These children have gone through rough times and they are still able to smile and open up to anyone. I also realized that these beautiful children have been mistreated, abandoned, and violated, and although humans have failed them, God has not and never will. The trip to Casa was a truly moving experience that I would recommend to anyone who wants to be closer to God.

Day 7

Friday, December 23, 2005

Rebecca—

It is such a weird feeling to go from school, friends, and final exams to spending every day with these children and doing things to help them and then finding yourself back home on your regular schedule. My family asked how the trip was and I told them it was fun, but that's all they wanted to know; they didn't even look at pictures. I think hearing about Casa and even seeing pictures cannot describe what it is really like. You have to go there, see the kids, and work with the sisters to understand it. I don't think there is anyone who could go to Casa and not take away a whole new view of things.

* **LUCIE BRYAR** earned a B.A. in English Communications from Rivier College in 1976. She has more than 20 years experience in newswriting, marketing, and public relations, including nearly 14 years as a staff writer for Rivier College. In her current position, she produces the faculty/staff newsletter, *Campus Forum*; Bryar also writes marketing materials for admissions, copy for the college website, and feature and news articles for the magazine, *Rivier Today*.