

## **EL SALVADOR: TRANSFORMING HEARTS AND MINDS**

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**E**ight Rivier students from various academic programs selflessly gave up their spring break to volunteer in El Salvador. We left on March, 8th 2014. It was a cold night in New Hampshire, but our hearts were warm knowing we were embarking on an incredible journey. Even though we left in the middle of the night, the students were energetic and excited, looking forward to exploring a new place and giving back to the less fortunate.

We were volunteering with an organization called Project Fiat. Fiat stands for Faith-In-Action-Together, and that's exactly what they do. The Catholic organization started, and is still run, by Sisters of the Handmaids of the Sacred Heart of Jesus. Project Fiat began with Handmaids volunteering their free time for service projects to reach out to needy communities. With help from Sisters and friends, they were able to extend this service abroad, by building a volunteer house in San Salvador, El Salvador. Casa Voluntariado Santa Rafaela Maria was inaugurated in March of 2004. The volunteers help build houses and roads with the local communities; they aid in the nurturing of malnourished children; they help to distribute food to those in need; and they share their hearts in a home for abandoned children. During their time in El Salvador, volunteers from all ages and backgrounds leave the comfort and efficiency of their culture, to enter to into the experiences, and limiting circumstances with which billions of the world's people live.



When we landed in Miami, we changed into our Project Fiat t-shirts. It was the way in which we were able to be recognized by the Project Fiat coordinator, Lynette, and any other volunteers once we arrived at the airport in San Salvador. One of our students had struck up a conversation on the almost

four hour flight from Miami with a friendly faced El Salvadoran man. He told her how much he appreciated what volunteers like us do, and how in just a week we do more for the community than the government has done in years. It was good feeling to know that the work we would be doing is recognized and appreciated by the locals. After landing, the same man approached me and said, "I just want to thank you for what you and your group are doing for my country. It really is a great thing. Trust me, when you leave in a week, El Salvador will have a special place in your heart." It was not until six days later that we would realize how true that statement really was.

As soon we got off the plane, we were struck by the heat. The airport is one of the only places in the city that has air conditioning, but it was still uncomfortably hot. We hustled through immigration and customs with no problem and were greeted by Lynette Kyle, in a matching blue t-shirt. Lynette is one of those rare people in the world, who you know was put on the planet to make it a better place. She works full time for the Handmaids, and has been doing so since their volunteer house was started ten years ago. She is maternal and warm, but speaks with strong passion for the volunteers and the community of El Salvador. She instantly made us feel welcome and safe, and proudly pointed out landmarks and sites on our 45 minute drive back to the volunteer house. It was nearly four when we arrived, and after a 15 hour travel day we were ready to relax in our new home for the week. During a brief orientation by Sister Gloria, the vibrant Sister who devotes almost her entire year at the volunteer house, tells us more about El Salvador and what to expect. We meet other volunteers from Georgia, Pennsylvania, and Colorado. There were about 25 volunteers at the house that week, and Rivier represented almost half.

We woke early on Sunday for mass. El Salvador is a very religious country, where almost the entire population practices the Catholic faith. The church we attended was massive and beautiful, but what was most striking was the amount of people there. It is clear the entire community comes together on Sundays. Children, teenagers, the elderly — all seemed so happy to be there and happily sang songs and said prayers. We were welcomed into their community too, never looked at as outsiders, but greeted with smiles and blessings. Mass is celebrated every hour on Sunday, and it is hard to imagine but all the masses that day will fill the stunning cathedral wall to wall.

Sunday was a day filled with many emotions, because after church we went to the Orphanage. This is something the volunteers at Project Fiat do every Sunday, and Lynette reminded us it is one of the only constants in these children's lives. The children ran up to us when we walked in, yelling "The gringos are here!" It was hard not to be affected by their appearances alone. Most of the children had clothes that didn't fit and dirty hair and faces. All of these children were wards of the state; most had been there for many years. Many were children of alcoholics and drug addicts, few had suffered physical and emotional abuse, and all had been abandoned at some point in their lives. This was a particularly tough time for our Rivier students, as they were frustrated that they did not know Spanish and couldn't communicate with the children. You will find in communities where children receive little to no education, it is rare they will understand even a word of English. Thankfully we've learned a smile is the same in all languages. Our students quickly forgot about the language barrier and started playing games with the children, puzzles, crafts, soccer, and jump rope.





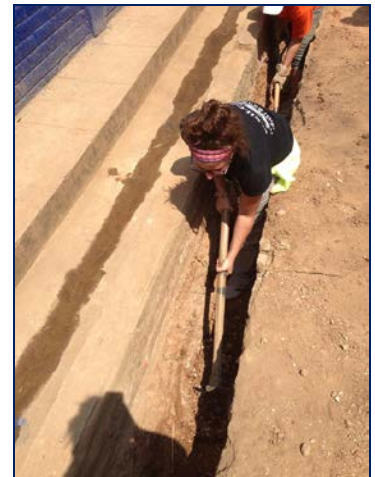


The children were shy, but enjoyed our company. It was sad to see they had trouble playing together and sharing, because they didn't have parents to teach them manners and how to get along with others. It was hard leaving the orphanage after just a few hours, but we felt better knowing a new group of volunteers would be there the following Sunday. Lynette told us on the ride home the government is working to shut down the orphanages in El Salvador, and send the children back to where they came from- many to parents who cannot support them or do not want them, others to aunts and uncles that already have many children to take care of.

I tried researching this topic when I returned, and found little. I do not know if it is because the government won't publicly admit this, or because no one wants to anger the government by researching a topic so controversial.

On Monday we started our work. The work Project Fiat does varies weekly, as they go where they are needed most. This week, we were spread up among the following four sites:

**The Computer Room:** This project was strictly physical labor. It was difficult to be shoveling and carrying dirt in the 90 degree heat and sunshine, but no one complained. It was hard to complain after seeing the conditions these children go to school in. The computer room is a classroom Project Fiat is building alongside a school they have also worked on in the past. An organization in the U.S. had donated ten computers, but the school had nowhere to put them. This elementary school had about four classrooms, and they made the most out of what they had. In the morning, the school would see grades K through four, and in the afternoon grades four through eight. The teachers at the school would work twelve hour days to see all the children.



School is a privilege in El Salvador that not all children are lucky enough to have. In order to attend school, you need to be able to afford a uniform, pencils, and paper, a luxury many children cannot afford. Due to the hard work of the volunteers and Project Fiat, the computer room will be completed in June. If we send students next year, they will be able to see the computer room completed that Rivier student's helped build.

**The Food Project:** This project has many goals in mind. The food project takes place in a recreational center in an outskirts of San Salvador. Every day, the center is filled with children that the volunteers play games with. It is designed to be an alternative to gangs and violence, which many young children turn to when they cannot afford school. The project also guarantees the children one meal a day. In order to be a part of this program, the children had to have been recommended by a doctor. These are children who were extremely malnourished. Over the years, Project Fiat has had the privilege of seeing them change and grow healthier every day. The food project does not just help the children of this village, but also the elderly. Many families are forced to relocate for jobs and the elderly are left behind, with limited resources and access to food. This project also guarantees the elderly one meal a day. Many husbands will come and bring meals home for their wives who can no longer walk to receive the food. An El Salvadoran woman organizes this program, and she is not paid for all her hard work. She says she is rewarded by making an impact in her community.



**The Nurse:** Our several nursing students on this trip felt particularly impacted by Morena. Morena is the town nurse in a village of hundreds. She is the only nurse who cares for these families, children, and pregnant mothers. It is her job to make sure the pregnant mothers are eating well, and staying healthy, and that the children are weighing enough and receiving the nutrition they need. Morena works seven days a week, all year long. She always has a smile on her face and proudly explains how much she loves her job. The volunteers travel around with Morena for the day, checking heart rates and measuring the children's height. The volunteers also help to explain healthy eating to pregnant mothers, something that is general knowledge in the U.S., but news to these mothers who have never been to school. Morena writes all her notes in a notebook with a pencil she borrowed from a volunteer. She knows every family in the village by name, and is very much respected and loved.





**The Doctor:** Students were also able to go to a clinic and work with a local doctor. This was particularly humbling and eye opening for our students. The doctor works alone in a clinic with only the bare necessities. His patients share oxygen masks, and use the waiting room as a makeshift exam room. There is no privacy, which our students came to realize is a privilege of ours in the U.S. People often take for granted that we have privacy when we see our doctors, and not everyone is lucky enough to have that in other parts of the world. The students assisted the doctor with his medical records, which consists solely of penciled in notes.



Thanks to the size of our group, most Rivier students were able to spend time at each site. We found our education and social work majors loved spending time with the children, and our nurses felt especially connected to the nurse and doctor. It was rewarding to hear them say how much they learned about their fields from only a week in El Salvador. Many were inspired to do more service, and change the way they live their lives. It is hard to not be angry after our return, when we see the way Americans waste so much, and show little appreciation for life's simple luxuries — such as clean water, food, public education, government assistance, and a place to call home.

It is rewarding to see our students' returned transformed. They speak so passionately about their time in El Salvador, it is clear it holds a special place in their hearts. Our work in El Salvador is just a piece of what these students can do to give back to countries that truly need our help. I am confident they will not only serve the world in our future, but inspire others to do so along the way. ■



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