

SIUE Nursing Students Reflect on Service Trip to Costa Rica



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Recently, more than 30 students and faculty members from Southern Illinois University Edwardsville's Schools of Nursing, Pharmacy, and Education, Health and Human Behavior exchanged their week-long break from classes to embark on a once-in-a-lifetime adventure in Costa Rica.

On this week's special episode of Segue, SIUE Chancellor Randy Pembroke, PhD, welcomes five guests, including Valerie Griffin, DNP, assistant clinical professor and coordinator of the family nursing practice program, Erin Brueggemann, of Bartelso, Kristen Highfill, of Milan, Jaylyn Lowrance, of Bethalto, and Miranda Sellars, of Alton. These individuals share their experiences from the School of

Nursing's recent alternative spring break service trip.

This episode of Segue will air at 9 a.m. this Sunday, April 29, on WSIE 88.7 FM The Sound.

"I have been travelling to Costa Rica as part of the Central American Mission Projects, or CAMP, for the past 14 years," Pembroke says. "For the past 10 years, my wife, Mary Jo, and I have taken students on those trips."

The Chancellor, his wife, as well as a group of nursing students and faculty members, worked in and near San José to provide vital healthcare screenings to residents in communities such as Pavas, Santo Thomas and Roblealto.

"Last year, through partnerships through Mission 11 and ER Abroad, we developed ongoing opportunities for our family nurse practitioner students to participate in medical missions," Griffin says. "In Costa Rica, we did screenings for patients, healthcare education, and we provided health assessments for children in some of the local organizations."

For the undergraduate nursing students who embarked on this journey with their professors, the young women surely had a lot on their mind leading into their trip. Lowrance and Highfill had issues falling asleep the night before the trip. Brueggemann, for example, didn't know how prepared to be, and accidentally overloaded her suitcase. Sellars was nervous since she'd never been on an airplane prior to this trip.

"Can you give our listeners an idea about the type of patients you were interacting with?" Pembroke inquires.

"We did a lot of our clinical settings in churches and schools," one student mentions. "Our patients were primarily students, and we saw a lot of coffee bean field workers. They had a wide array of health problems that we were able to use our skills for, so that was pretty cool!"

"A lot of the health issues we saw were the typical issues with hypertension, diabetes and other things like that, but there were a lot of little things we picked up on that we weren't expecting."

In fact, the students' first patient was one they were not expecting at all—the first patient to walk into the clinic had blood running down his leg.

"The patient actually dropped a machete on his leg. Luckily, we were only about two miles from where the incident occurred, and he was able to get to us," one student says. "Had we not been there, he would have had to walk 10 to 15 miles to a hospital, or he would have sat at home, without any care that he needed. It was a blessing we were there."

The students and faculty faced certain cultural challenges while providing care to community members, particularly with the language barrier. As the day went on, the students said, the children were very receptive to their instructions and even began having fun with their otoscopes and other tools. Along with the assistance of interpreters, the students were able to conduct thorough exams.

When the students were not conducting vital health screenings throughout the country, the group handed out food, distributed over 2,500 pairs of shoes and new backpacks to students, visited and interacted with children from an orphanage, worked to clean up the orphanage grounds, and took in the sights at La Paz Waterfall Gardens.

“I know it sounds kind of cheesy, or like it’s a little cliché, but I do think the trip changed me and made me look at the world differently,” one student said. “It solidified my career choice and realize why I’m supposed to be a nurse, and why that path was chosen for me.”

“Valerie, it’s clear you’re very proud of these individuals. They did an amazing job,” Pembroke says. “Can you talk about why this program is important?”

“In nursing school, you want to be able to teach your students to be able to take care of a diverse patient population,” Griffin said. “We have diverse patient populations here in the St. Louis area, but when you take students to Costa Rica, you take the nursing students out of their comfort zone and really teach them to care for that diverse population.

“To me, they exceeded my expectations. They were leaders and shared their skills. They truly stepped up.”

Tune into Segue this Sunday to hear Pembroke’s conversation with the students and Griffin in its entirety.

By Madelaine Gerard, SIUE Marketing & Communications