



STUDENT PROFILE:

Becky Merkey

BUILDING RELATIONSHIPS *to help* Nicaraguans



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This past summer, second year student Becky Merkey volunteered in Nicaragua – it was her fourth time doing so. She was accompanied by a team of eight high school soccer players who she coaches, and her husband, Matt.

“These trips to Nicaragua are not the stereotypical mission trip,” explained Merkey. “The goal is not to go build and fix things; rather, the goal is to build relationships, invest in and come alongside the Nicaraguans in whatever ways we can to help them realize their potential. That looks different every year.”

In her most recent visit, Merkey and her group stayed at the orphanage Arms of Love, which serves the children of the surrounding community. At the orphanage, the children learn English, take computer and music lessons, receive tutoring and meals, and play games and soccer.

“The families of these children are quite poor and several of the children may be living at Arms of Love if this outreach program did not exist,” said Merkey.

Arms of Love is a different type of orphanage than those in the U.S. because most of the kids have one or more parent.

“The kids who are at Arms of Love are there for a variety of reasons; however, many of them have survived severe trauma,” said Merkey. “Because of my own past trauma, I am able to connect with the children on a whole different level. I did a couple of devotionals in which I focused on uncovering their strengths, talents and unique gifts. I hope to build off of that next summer and challenge them to rise up and have a positive impact in their country.”

Merkey delegated games and activities to the soccer players who accompanied her to Nicaragua.

“They came up with so many fun and engaging activities,” she said. “It was amazing to see the girls from the U.S. interacting with the Nicaraguans, many of whom were similar in age. While Matt and I have built a great rapport with the children at Arms of Love, my soccer athletes were able to connect in a way we cannot, and it was beautiful to watch.”

Merkey and her group also helped build a new home for one of the families.

“Matt and I know their daughter from serving the community kids last year, so that was extra special,” she said. “It took us about four hours to demolish the house and then only \$1,500 and about three days to build the new house. At the end of the build, we got to present a

lock and key to the family signifying a new start. What is crazy to think about is that this is also the first time the family is able to lock their home and feel safe at night. This also happened to be the first house to ever have a flushing toilet that Arms of Love built.”

Merkey encourages other pharmacy students to pursue an international experience or to serve in an area with an underserved population.

“Serving internationally allows you to see a culture outside of your own, and this exposure encourages you to think outside the box in terms of pharmacy as well as life in general,” she said. “It’s kind of like the first year of college when you realize that families function and communicate much differently from your own. Neither is necessarily right or wrong, but the new exposure provides an opportunity for personal growth. You can start to sift through these experiences and keep the strengths from your own culture and improve the weaknesses by drawing from others.”

Merkey says there are several lessons she learned from Nicaragua that she will integrate into her pharmacy career.

“First, be quick to listen and learn, and slow to talk and teach. I spent the first two to three years getting to know the Nicaraguans, learning about them, just being with them and essentially proving myself worthy of their trust and reciprocation,” she said. “Second, everyone has a story and we must keep this in mind, especially with the most difficult patients. I don’t know many people with a goal of distancing themselves from others and being difficult; there is usually a story behind that behavior.

“If we can be humble, patient and build enough trust, we can get to that story, start to understand our patient, and then finally treat them.”

Her hope is to take the first medically-based team composed of mostly pharmacy students, as well as another team of soccer players, to Nicaragua next summer.