



Immersed: School of Education Expands Offerings in Belize

More than anything, it was the ecstatic enthusiasm in the eyes of her Belizean students at the sight of such simple supplies as stickers, colored construction paper, and crayons that reaffirmed her decision to forego much of her winter vacation to take part in a new immersion program under the School of Education, Kathryn Bohan said.

"It speaks to the need for resources," said Bohan, a junior in the Dual Degree in Teacher Preparation program and psychology, referring to the students' reactions at Sacred Heart Catholic Elementary School in Dangriga, Belize. "You can do so much with so little."

For Bohan, the two-week, intersession immersion in early January was her second trip to Belize. This time she acted as a student leader and, along with three other dual-degree program undergraduates and a graduate teacher education student, helped to inaugurate a new program called Project Learn Belize.

Accompanied by Teacher Education Department Chair and Project Learn Belize architect Geoffrey Dillon, S.J. and two other staff, education students joined with 10 students and faculty from University Ministry for the trek to Dangriga. Considered the unofficial capitol of Belize's Garifuna culture, primarily black Caribs whose ancestors were colonized and oppressed by the British in the 18th century, Dangriga is a major cultural and artistic center of about 11,500 residents.

With next to no public education system in Belize, Sacred Heart, like most schools, depends heavily on private and church support. Enter USF. Since 2004, students and faculty from the Arrupe Immersion Program have put on an annual, weeklong, kids camp, helped educators in the classroom, established a school computer lab, refurbished school facilities, and met with school administrators, area officials, and health care professionals.

Fr. Dillon sees Project Learn Belize as a chance to use Arrupe's longstanding relationship as a springboard to expand assistance to Sacred Heart and the wider community, while at the same time expanding immersion opportunities for education students and others at USF in one of the few English-speaking countries in Central America.

"Project Learn Belize is a first attempt to provide students in the teacher education program with an education-focused experience outside the usual confines of American education," Dillon said.

The immersion is meant to expose students to the realities of the developing world, while shedding light on the cultural differences, traditions, and challenges facing educators, health professionals, and elected officials. "(Expanding their) worldview perspective leads (students) to critical reflection and analysis of their own culture, traditions, and the call to action and transformation," Fr. Dillon said.

During the immersion, students and faculty again ran a half-day enrichment camp the first week, dividing students by age for arts and crafts, reading, and computer (think Google Earth) activities. In the second week, USF students worked as teacher aides, some even preparing and teaching the day's lessons - illustrating some of the latest teaching methods in an environment where few teachers receive even a bachelor's degree, Dillon said.

Where teachers depend strictly on dictation, note taking, and rote memorization as their primary teaching tools, even among the elementary grades, striving to craft lessons that got kids out of their seats was her objective, Bohan said.

"We used cut out triangles to learn fractions; and kids went to the front of the classroom with letters written on pieces of construction paper and arranged themselves to spell words," she said. When she wasn't conducting a lesson for the entire class, she worked one-on-one with kids to improve their reading. Such personal attention is rare since a typical classroom has 30 students, Bohan said.

Fr. Dillon is also intent on expanding opportunities for School of Education faculty to teach the latest advances in pedagogy to Belizean instructors, including children's literacy, exceptional and disabled student needs, and technology training, he said.

USF President Stephen A. Privett, S.J. who spent four days in Belize assessing USF's role in Dangriga over the intersession, also sees expanded opportunities on the horizon. "I think we need to continue current programming and develop in-service training for teachers that would provide immeasurable assistance to professional development of faculty and improve student learning," Fr. Privett said.

Health care is also a critical need in Dangriga, which is why Fr. Dillon invited School of Nursing Dean Judith Karshmer to town over the intersession for an information-gathering trip. The head nurse at the area hospital almost immediately expressed interest in USF master's program nursing students, already registered nurses, working with her staff to improve patient care, efficiency, and educate nurse leaders, Karshmer said. The first trip by nursing students could be as soon as this summer.



Laura Griley, USF graduate teacher education student, lends a hand in a Belizean classroom during the 2007-08 winter intersession.