

## Project Nica: Mark R Isfeld students travel to Nicaragua

For 10 days during Spring Break, a group of 17 students from Mark R. Isfeld traveled to Nicaragua to try out their Spanish skills, develop their cultural awareness, and be involved in community service activities.

Based in Jiquilillo, a small fishing community on the pacific north coast, students were involved daily in some kind of local community project. In this second Isfeld service trip to Nicaragua, students worked for 5 days helping to build a house which has been provided to a young mom and her five-year old son. Not only did students contribute through their fundraising, they mixed cement, dug holes, carried bricks, and also had the chance to get to know the families who live in this cooperative housing community.

One morning, after an ecological conservation lesson, they did a boat tour in Padre Ramos Estuary, one of the largest mangrove estuaries of Central America. They further explored this unique site in early morning kayak trips, and supported its preservation through the adoption of a turtle nest and donating funds to a new turtle hatchery. With thousands of Nicaraguan families celebrating Semana Santa on the beach at Padre Ramos, students did a beach clean up to encourage others to be more respectful of the sensitive ecosystem.

A very powerful experience was the visit to the community of El Limonal. What was to be a temporary shelter after Hurricane Mitch has become a permanent settlement of about 3000 people. Here families, including mothers and young children, work full time collecting objects from the dump. The Isfeld students sponsored a lunch which they prepared, cooked and served to more than 300 children. A neighbourhood walk, with local kids holding hands and on riding on backs, ended at the dump where students saw first hand a very different reality to their own.

Everywhere they went the Isfeld students engaged with adults and children, talking, sharing and playing, all with huge smiles. A generous donation of from Days for Girls was distributed in 3 rural medical clinics visited. Students raised over \$7,000 to contribute to projects, the most significant being the partial sponsorship of the house, one which is also more resistant to the significant impact of climate change being experienced in the region.

Through the course of their stay in Nicaragua students did physical work in extreme heat, enjoyed simple food, witnessed poverty and were welcomed warmly with open hearts and smiling faces. As one student stated, it was an absolutely amazing and life-changing experience.