Hills of Hope

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Hills of Hope

STUDENTS BUILD SUPPORT NETWORK FOR CHILEAN CHILDREN’S HOME.

Roughly 250 Furman students take part in a study abroad program each year. The trips typically feature tours of historical locations, plus opportunities to stray from the beaten path to explore small towns and natural attractions.

Submerged in a different culture, students return to campus with hundreds of digital images, a different outlook on life and, perhaps, the e-mail address of a new international friend. Few, however, develop any lasting ties in their host country.

Lindsay Woolf, Nadia Savova and Morgan Jones became exceptions during a 2006 winter term program in Valparaiso, Chile, that focused on community and environmental health.

On January 21, a 15-minute bus ride took the trio and 21 other Furman students to a dilapidated two-story house, known as Hagar Maria Goretti, that was home to 40 abused and neglected girls ranging in age from 4 to 18 years. Many were victims of sexual abuse, abandoned by their parents or removed from dysfunctional homes.

The visit was organized by Jane Powell, wife of Frank Powell, the health and exercise science professor who accompanied the group to Chile with Veronica Yockey, his departmental colleague. Jane Powell took along a collection of Spanish-language children’s books to donate to the home. The plan was for the Furman group to spend time reading and playing games with the children.

Some of the Furman students spoke little Spanish and didn’t know what to expect. Unaccustomed to visitors, the timid children seemed even more nervous.

But in a small courtyard adjacent to the center, the barriers soon came down. The girls, hungry for attention, quickly warmed to the students, who began reading them stories.

In looking around the house, Woolf, Savova and Jones, all members of the Class of 2006, were shocked by the cramped living quarters, limited lighting and lack of hot water. A planned two-hour stay turned to four.

After leaving the home, the Furman group passed a hat and collected more than $200. Days later, students returned with clothes, toiletries and school supplies purchased from a nearby department store. They also met with the director of the house to discuss its needs.

“[The donations] were just a band-aid. We wanted to do more,” says Woolf. “We wanted to do something that would make a lasting impact.”

So Jane Powell, a retired school administrator, arranged a meeting with a local attorney and with Todd Temkin, a U.S. native who heads a non-profit organization, the Foundation of Valparaiso (www.fundacionvalparaiso.org).

During the next few weeks, Woolf, Savova, Jones and Powell devised a plan to create Hills of Hope, a U.S.-based non-profit organization that would raise funds for the home and channel donations through the foundation. Powell donated $10,000 of inheritance money to jump-start the project.

Furman also sent a check for $3,000, which came after a unanimous vote by the student group to stay in a hostel instead of a hotel during a side trip to Argentina. The $3,000 was the difference in the cost of hostel and hotel accommodations.

Savova says the name “Hills of Hope” was derived from the hilly terrain of Valparaiso. “These children are in tremendous need of some love and attention,” she says.

Before incorporating Hills of Hope, Jane Powell met with the home’s director to develop a long-term plan for the center. She hopes that Hills of Hope will provide a structured framework that will spark financial support from both Chile and the United States. Her church, St. Mark’s Methodist in Seneca, S.C., has provided funds and books for the home.

Currently, the home receives only $1,800 a year from the Chilean government for each girl, plus modest donations from the community. “Our ultimate goal is to help them build a new facility and expand programs,” she says.

Although Savova, Jones and Woolf have graduated, they remain connected and are continuing to work on behalf of Hogar Maria Goretti. Woolf’s boyfriend, Trey Grainger ’07, has developed www.hillsofhope.org, a Web site that features photos from the Furman trip, a summary of the group’s fund-raising efforts, and a brief history of the home.

— John Roberts