

Service Tour 2010: Costa Rica

Tejarcillos, San Jose | July 7th – 19th

This year, IRFF's Service Tour took place in Tejarcillos, an impoverished community on the outskirts of Costa Rica's capital city of San Jose. We partnered with the Friendship Ambassadors Foundation (www.faf.org) to plan the project – a renovation of the facilities of the Light for the Nations Foundation (Fundación Luz Para Las Naciones). Twenty participants from all over the US joined us on this project.

The Light for the Nations Foundation is an evangelical group that has taken it upon themselves to care for neglected children and elderly in their community. They provide meals for children who are not cared for in their homes. Often, these children's parents are incapable or too poor to provide for them, or they are orphans living with extended family members. Many of them do not attend school because they cannot afford the uniform and books required to do so. The staff of Light for the Nations cooks them lunch every day and looks out for their well being in other ways as well. In addition, Light for the Nations cares for a group of elderly community members who live in a block of apartments near their center. Elderly people in Costa Rica are usually cared for by their children and families, but in poor communities like Tejarcillos, the younger generations are sometimes unable to afford the expense of caring for a parent. Too old to work and unable to support themselves, these individuals and couples rely on Light for the Nations for their day to day well-being.



Our task was to renovate the simple space used as the Light for the Nations' center and to complete badly needed repairs in and around the apartments lived in by the elderly. At the center, we started by ripping up the damaged floorboards to expose the clay ground and tearing down rotting walls. We then dug trenches in the ground where we installed pipes for two toilets and a shower and another trench where we put in the foundation for a cement wall. Next, we mixed thousands of pounds of cement by hand, that we poured on the floor and spent hours leveling. The cement walls around the outside of the room and wooden walls dividing the bathrooms went up last, and while we had to leave the finishing touches for the community members to complete, the room was transformed into a cleaner, more usable space for the Foundation.



Meanwhile, another group of participants dug an irrigation ditch on the outside of the center, a messy job of digging through heavy mud mixed with rocks and tree roots on a steep inclined that made the work extremely difficult. Others laid a new layer of concrete on the walkway around the center and extended the roof to cover the walkway which will help keep the children – who often sit outside to eat their meals – covered from the rain.

At the homes of the elderly, we started by removing a large pile of trash and dirt that had accumulated in the garden area. A group of participants then started to break up

the crumbling sidewalks and replace them with fresh concrete to better allow the residents – especially those with walkers and wheelchairs – to get around outside their apartments. In addition, we replaced the gutters around the apartments and some of the siding on the buildings. Participants created improved drainage ditches to carry the water away from the homes and repaired parts of the apartments that had been damaged by leaking water. Inside the apartments, they also replaced toilets and kitchen sinks, fixed showers to allow the elderly to get in and out easier, and repaired a wall and window that had large gaps in it.



In the middle of our work, we took a break on Sunday to climb a beautiful mountain that rose behind Tejarcillos. We departed at 8 AM with members of the community with us, hoping to be back in time for the World Cup Final at 12:30. Instead, we found ourselves on an epic 8 hour adventure that, while more challenging than any of us expected, was an experience that none of us will soon forget. As the original route down proved to be impossible, we had to make our way around the back of the mountain and circle around to the original path. We scrambled down steep hills, were drenched in two rain showers and ending up crisscrossing a river multiple times as we made our way back home – too late for the game.

During the time the group was working, we also met with several organizations that were working to address social issues in Costa Rica. We had presentations from FINCA (a microfinance organization), the Inter-American Institute for Human Rights, an organization call the Live in Peace Foundation which promotes the rights of marginalized groups in Costa Rica and we were given a tour of the United Nations Peace University. These meetings allowed the participants to understand their work in the broader context of what the needs of Costa Ricans are and what organizations are doing to address these needs.



During the work section of the Service Tour, participants stayed in the homes of local families, allowing them to experience the lifestyles and customs of the community in a personal way. Participants overwhelmingly loved the homestays, growing very close to their families and deeply appreciating the warmth and love that they were treated with.

After the work was finished, our group left Tejarcillos and traveled to La Fortuna and the Arenal Volcano, one of the most active volcanoes in the world. We hiked to a beautiful waterfall at the bottom of the volcano and swam in its pools, then took an evening drive to try to see the regular small eruptions from the other side of the mountain, which unfortunately, we did not. Participants then enjoyed the natural hot springs on the hotel grounds before



rising early the next morning to go zip-lining through the rainforest. Afterwards, we made our way back to San Jose for our flight home.



Our last two nights in Costa Rica, we reflected first on the relationships we had developed during this journey together, and then on how the experience on the Service Tour had affected us. The group reflected privately and then shared with each other, several expressing that this project was one of the best experiences of their life and that it had changed them and the way that they look at the world. In the end, our group parted ways as different people, having gained

deep friendships and contributed to a community in need in a substantial and tangible way, as well as with memories that will last for years to come.

Paul Byrne