

## Global Community Service: Dilegege '06 Visits Panama on Medical Mission

A calling to experience life in another country and to put to use her own knowledge led Sara Dilegege '06 to volunteer with the Global Medical Training Program over her spring break from Smith College. She ventured to Panama and helped conduct clinics for indigenous people in small mountain villages in the rain forest. Sara is majoring in biology and has spent the last two summers assisting former FA parent Dr. Steven Atwood at his veterinary clinic on Martha's Vineyard. This experience sparked her interest in human medicine as well.

"On our first clinic day, we went to a small village. It was a terrifying trip. We had to go fast down the hills to make it back up, and sometimes we could walk faster than the bus was going. Add to that the crazy turns and the fact that the road was crumbling off the slopes. We were told that in a few months these people would be completely cut off from everyone else because the road was falling down the mountain.

"We set up the clinic in school classrooms. Some of the people did not speak Spanish, but instead used a local dialect that we were told was dying off. We mostly saw women and children; very few men ever came to the clinics. We treated for parasites, dehydration, and malnutrition in the kids. Almost every mother had a urinary tract, yeast, or kidney infection. The water there was not clean at all. There were no bathrooms, no running water, and no electricity. The kids were underweight because of parasite overloads that gave them diarrhea and loss of appetite.

"Most women there marry at 14 and have seven or eight children. I met one woman who had eleven children and she was only in her late 20's. In these tribal villages, when women are in labor, they are still expected to go off into the woods alone to have their babies.

"The kids were cute though. They followed us around and played games with us. They loved seeing pictures of themselves on the cameras. I brought things like stickers, pens, and hair clips, and they loved these things. It also helped them relax when we saw them in the clinic.

"We conducted our second clinic in Changuinola. When someone is sick, they carry people all the way to the hospitals, and then are refused because they can't pay. One woman and six of her children woke up at 5:00 a.m. to see us. They walked thirty minutes to the river, canoed, and then walked two hours to our clinic.

"The hardest part for me was that we couldn't treat everything. There were older people with high blood pressure, and we couldn't do anything in spite of the fact that they were losing their eye sight, feeling dizzy, and losing feeling in their hands. We also knew that people didn't always finish taking their medication, so their condition would probably get worse.

"Our last clinic was a little over an hour from Changuinola. This day was definitely the hardest, even though it was the most developed village we visited. We found out that the schools didn't have any water, so the kids go all day in the heat without drinking. Most people can't afford to buy water, so everyone has problems with



parasites. It was so bad that in some cases whole bodies were covered in open sores from scratching. Wounds were dirty and covered in flies. There was also an eight-year old girl with tuberculosis. The family wouldn't afford treatment for her grandfather, so the girl got it, and they couldn't get treatment for her. If one family member has a disease, the whole family is likely to get it because they all sleep together on the floor. We all knew that the girl most likely would not make it.

“However, in spite of all of this, I met some of the cutest kids I've seen in my life, and some of them had the best manners!

“Overall, the trip was amazing. It was an unbelievable experience and much more than I expected. I knew that we take clean water for granted, but what about not having any water at all? Medications that we may pay little for, they can't afford. Our clinics were a luxury for them especially because another clinic is not likely to come for a year or ever again. I loved working with both the kids and the adults, and hope to go on one of these trips again. In fact, I was appointed publicity chair for the Global Medical Training Program on the Smith campus, so I will definitely stay involved.”

