



NANCY DEMARIA
Class of 2007
Greensboro, North Carolina

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In June 2006, I traveled to Mexico to live and work with nuns in missions as a school teacher and physician's intern, primarily with women and children. The immediate generosity and welcoming nature of everyone I encountered was astounding. A lack of material possessions does not stifle their spirit, and I observed this everywhere I went – from Mexico City, to San Ildefonso, to Coatzacoalcos.

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My home away from home while I was in Mexico was with Sister Sandra in Mexico City. She and my great-aunt, Sister Andrea, established the Helen J. DeMaria Fund for Children, a mission in honor of my late-grandmother. During my first week in Mexico, we went to this mission and hundreds of women and children gathered in the churches of the different towns, to receive food and clothes, and hear spiritual teachings from Sister Sandra. My sister, Laura, and I taught the children English, and were often invited to their homes to play and meet the rest of their family. Sister Sandra is working hard to establish a vocational school and clinic in this region for the children, and I plan on returning to help her with these things in the future.

After that first week, I traveled alone to San Ildefonso for one month to work with Sister Mary Jane of the Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ. The Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ is a different order of nuns that I contacted independently of the Benedictine order of my Aunt, Sister Andrea. I asked if I could live and work with them for the summer, in two contrasting places: San Ildefonso and Coatzacoalcos. The town of San Ildefonso is in a semi-desert, and almost exclusively populated by the Otomi people. Until no more than 25 years ago, the Otomi in this region did not even speak Spanish, but only their native language. Women and children always wear the traditional brightly colored ruffled shirt, apron, and hat – even when working in the fields. On the other hand, Coatzacoalcos is a bustling and crowded city on the east coast. Driving through the middle of the city, one may see horses, chickens, abandoned buildings, or dirt roads. However, despite its appearance, Coatzacoalcos is very dear to my heart, as is San Ildefonso.

As a school teacher in San Ildefonso, I gave lessons to children ages K-5 all at once, and my lesson plans had to be



adjusted to fit the needs of all age groups. We learned about plant life, personal health, and a variety of other things. My children were patient with me while I was getting adjusted to the language, and we learned a lot from each other. While in San Ildefonso, I discovered a clinic where I asked to intern with the doctor. This was something that I had not planned beforehand, but the two doctors in the rural clinic welcomed me and were happy to let me observe them. I was able to integrate



my work with children into also educating them on proper hygiene practices, and getting to know their families who came into the clinic. Many of the children came in with dysentery and pneumonia. These are the main causes of death among children in San Ildefonso, because of poor sanitation

and malnutrition. It is fortunate that I could fight these statistics through my work in the clinic and at the school.

In addition to the health problems in the area, there is rampant alcoholism among men, which leaves many women and their children stranded without financial or emotional support. After school in the afternoons, Sister Mary Jane and I walked along old dirt paths, worn by Otomi people over hundreds of years, to visit single mothers of the area. We offered them companionship, and gave them sewing machines and supplies. Their skills in sewing are enabling them to become self-sufficient. Almost every woman of child-bearing age (beginning at age 14 or 15) that I encountered was either pregnant, or holding a newborn infant. With so many children and so little financial support, it is vital that they gain the entrepreneurial skills necessary to survive, and I am thankful I could help them with this.

For my final month in Mexico, I lived in Coatzacoalcos with Sister Frances and Sister Joan from the Poor Handmaids of Jesus Christ. During this time I shadowed rural doctors and dentists, and volunteered



in the soup kitchens for children. With the doctors and dentists, I rode several hours through bumpy dirt roads and dense forests to a different town everyday where we worked. Our services were not hindered by the sweltering heat, or by the quality of our makeshift office, which was almost always a one-room building with a palm tree roof and insufficient lighting. Once again, I worked primarily with children, applying fluoride to their teeth, and consoling them while getting teeth extracted. I experienced firsthand the deterioration of health care with poverty, and saw illnesses and problems that are virtually nonexistent in the U.S. The diligence of these health care professionals is commendable, and I hope to join them again someday, as a fellow physician.

While in Coatzacoalcos, I was asked to teach a Saturday art class in a small school for children with learning disabilities. Because of malnutrition and inadequate schooling, the students not only were behind by several years in their studies, but several of them also were physically stunted in growth, appearing 4-5 years younger than what they actually were. Here,



poverty not only correlated with decline in health care, but also with decreased quality in educational systems. My students thoroughly enjoyed learning new art techniques, and were eager to know more – proof that they will overcome much to achieve success in their lives, despite the situations into which they were born.

My Burch fellowship experience has taught me to never take anything or anyone for granted, because life and the future are always uncertain. Many of my friends in Mexico wake up to the coldness of wind whipping through thin sheet metal walls, or to the sounds of their siblings crying of hunger on dirt floors. Many of the mothers work both the fields and tend to the children in the home because their husbands have left them, or are abusive and drunk. Thankfully, women and children have support systems created by large and extended families which enable them to survive. Thank you, Mr. Burch, for giving me this opportunity to serve others and learn from this life-changing experience.