

Students Bring Back Powerful Memories from El Salvador

The trip, organized by [Campus Ministry](#) in partnership with Christians for Peace in El Salvador (CRISPAZ), opened hearts and minds to the culture, conditions and challenges of the people of El Salvador, who are still feeling the effects of a 12-year civil war. In a word, there was a sense of solidarity among the Dominican students upon return.

“Solidarity was a word that we heard every single day and it struck a chord with me. It’s something I feel passionate about,” said Mandy Gilbertson, a junior English major who intends to pursue a Masters in public policy after graduating from Dominican. “The whole trip basically reaffirmed that I’m on the path I need to be in life and I’m where I’m meant to be.”

It was a powerful encounter for the Dominican group individually. For Isabel Rangel, a junior biology major and pre-med student, it was another chance to reconnect with her past and build for her future. Her first trip to El Salvador as a sophomore was to learn about her family’s culture. The second trip this year was to learn more about her own identity.

“To know myself I needed to know my history. I needed to know my culture. I needed to know what my mom stands for and the values she teaches me and the true meaning of those words and values that are instilled in me,” said Rangel, a Resident Assistant at Dominican. “I decided to go back and find me.

These soul-searching, life-changing experiences are common for Dominican students who visit El Salvador. Lianni Castro, Campus Minister, has led [Engaged Immersion](#) trips there the past two years. She has developed and established partnerships with friends and contacts in El Salvador. Each time she is impressed with the impact the trip has on the young men and women from Dominican who are meeting the goal of the University’s religion department, which is to connect to meaningful spiritual and social experiences in the world today.

“Students are hungry for connection, meaning and purpose. A transformation takes place when they have an experience where they are challenged and brought outside of their comfort zone,” Castro said. “Two weeks immersed in another country’s history, people and current events and providing space for deep introspection and reflection can completely change a student’s world view and bring about a deeper understanding of self as well as their place in our world.”

In El Salvador, Castro and Cynthia Taylor, assistant professor of religion and history at Dominican, were inspired by what they saw and met in reflection sessions with the students to get their insights. Mariah Chinchilla, Victoria Diaz-Rebollar, Cara Cooper, Jannel Mariano, David Mendez and April Moran-Reza joined fellow students Gilbertson and Rangel in those daily get-togethers.

“The reflections at the end of the day allowed us to process and swallow what El Salvador was throwing at us,” Rangel said. “I’m not trying to romanticize the poverty there, but it was to process the reality of what this world really is. We would process and journal what we were feeling.”

Dominican students and faculty also met with humanitarian groups who encouraged them to share stories of what they witnessed in El Salvador.

Senior communications major Mariah Chinchilla, who was inspired to go to El Salvador -- her parents' homeland -- as a means of better learning Spanish and connecting with her grandparents, visited the 300-foot long Monument to Memory and Truth. It is engraved with nearly 30,000 names of El Salvadorans who were killed during the civil war, which claimed the lives of 75,000. Chinchilla saw her family surname several times.

"It gave me the realization that I'm here for a reason and I have a responsibility to learn as much as I can," Chinchilla said. "I knew before I left on the trip that I wanted to feel good about what I want to do with my communications skills. I want to contribute whatever work I have to a cause that I believe in. When I left El Salvador, it just solidified that. I came back even more focused."

Gilbertson had her eyes set on going to El Salvador even before she transferred to Dominican for the fall 2013 semester.

"I pretty much read every single thing on the Dominican website and I made a list of all the things I wanted to do and El Salvador was on that list," she says. "El Salvador really spoke to me."

Rangel's reasons for going to El Salvador were deeply personal. Her mother and grandmother experienced the horror of the civil war there before escaping. They have been reluctant to share those painful memories with Rangel; hence she felt a need to find answers to her questions. She twice went to El Salvador and would welcome another opportunity.

"I learned in El Salvador that vulnerability is the core of everything. Every emotion," Rangel said.

"I learned that even through the ashes of everything flowers will come up. I had to experience that in El Salvador."

Rangel, however, did not realize how profound the experience would be. It resonated with the perspective she has gained at Dominican.

"I practiced all of the four ideals of Dominican," she said. "I practiced 'study' because I was learning about El Salvador and the influence the United States has over it as well as the Dominican order's presence in El Salvador. I learned 'community' and 'service' and how we gave of ourselves. And I reflected a lot."

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