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Teens connect with old ways in Mexico



Marijke Wijnen, 15, of South Bend taught English to children in the village of Chicueyaco, Mexico, during a missions trip she recently took with the youth of First Unitarian Church, South Bend. Photo provided

By **ALICE CULP** *Tribune Staff Writer*

A four-hour bus ride took seven teenagers and three chaperones, of First Unitarian Church in South Bend, to the market town of Cuetzalan, where their hotel was located, from Puebla, Mexico, the nearest city.

But the group still had some traveling to do. It took another 20-minute ride to the end of the bus line, and a half-mile hike down a steep hill, before they reached the village of Chicueyaco.

“I had never been anywhere so remote in my life,” says Bethy Williams, 18, of South Bend. “It seemed almost untouched to me.”

The group was in Mexico on a missions trip organized through Global Citizens Network (GCN), out of St. Paul, Minn. Its members were there in July to help put a secure roof on a small health clinic offering immunizations and health care education to the people of Chicueyaco.

The village is a community made up of Nahua, indigenous peoples who retain their own customs and language. Many of the women still wear traditional dress.

The South Bend group had purchased materials for the roof and was planning to spend a few days helping with the actual work.

They were amazed at the size of the clinic. Bethy compared it to a small room in their church.

“We were thinking about St. Joe hospital and all these things being built here,” she says. “And they had been planning it since about 2002.”

The clinic offers a mixture of modern and Nahua traditional herbal medicine and makes use of nurses and traveling doctors.

The teens worked on chopping rocks for cement and hauling sand down a steep half-mile trail to the building site.

“It was frustrating because you would get this little bag of sand ... walk down and dump it out,” Bethy says. “And (then) you would go back up.”

Another teen who made the trip says she enjoyed the physical labor.

“More than anyone else in the group, I just liked carrying the load up and down the hill,” says

Marijke Wijnen, 15, of South Bend.

"I found it meditative. I could really think because, when you are exhausted, somehow your mind is clear."

The group didn't just work on the building, the girls say. Their GCN leader told them that connecting with the people and understanding their culture was what was important.

Sometimes communication was hard, Marijke says, since some of the villagers didn't even speak Spanish. The older generation usually spoke only Nahuatl, she says.

When the teens arrived in the village, some of the children asked for English lessons, and their mothers thought it was an excellent idea.

So, they set up an English class in a nearby church that had no glass in its windows. The students ranged in age from 4 to 16.

"Every day we had more kids. The first day we had about 15, maybe, and then like 30 the last day," Marijke says.

"I think it was great that we taught because communicating with little kids without a language is easier. I felt like I connected with a lot of the little kids."

Every night GCN planned something fun for the visitors. They had a Mexican band come one night, and one of the local teens taught her to dance, Bethy says.

"I loved talking to the teenagers there. It was so much fun just comparing our lives," she says.

"At first it was a little depressing. I mean for me, it was this huge exposure to poverty that I never had before. ... (In Chicueyaco) money doesn't even exist; everything was through trade. It was just such a different concept."

The girls visited a one-bedroom home where many family members lived together, including the family's grandmother. Quite a difference, they say, from our culture, where parents are often put in a nursing home when they grow old.

The villagers spend a lot of time together, the women meeting regularly for a co-op they have, Marijke says.

"They had a real sense of community," Marijke says of the village. "I think I learned how important that was and how they were able to support each other."

On their last day, the teens held a little party for the people of Chicueyaco. They baked cookies and put up a piñata. They also had their English students give a presentation.

When the teens finished serving food, the village women brought them gifts of tortillas and burritos that they had made. Each teen had an armload of food stacked about a foot high, before they finally found some bags to put it in.

"If it hadn't been so funny, because they stacked them up so high, I would have started crying," Marijke says.

“We were so overwhelmed that they wanted to give us stuff, because they didn’t have much.”

“I definitely think many absolutes were challenged,” Bethy says. “You start wondering about yourself and your culture, and every paradigm you have is just chopped and you kind of have to rethink everything.”

She still e-mails a couple of people in Mexico that she met on the trip, which she says gave her a new perspective on the extent of inequality in the world.

“I think we obtained something from this culture that we can carry on in our lives and help other people understand, too,” Bethy says.
