

American Heritage students travel to Mexico for service project

Barbara Christiansen - Daily Herald | Posted: Monday, April 4, 2011 10:29 am

Three hours north of Mexico City lies the city of Tequisquiapan. Although it is a tourist site for Mexicans and others, many of its residents live in primitive conditions.

Students from American Heritage School in American Fork recently spent a week there, helping to improve those conditions by building concrete floors and stoves for residents. This is the third year that AHS has conducted a project of this nature. The other two provided assistance to Ensenada and Vera Cruz.

Fourteen students and four adults went to Tequisquiapan. Spanish teacher Ruel Haymond was among them.



"We went with Family to Family Humanitarian Expeditions," he said. "Its purpose is to unite families from the U.S. and Mexico. We laid cement floors, from small ones -- about shower-size -- to those in a dining room. We built stoves so the families could be more efficient. That protected the mothers who were breathing in soot for so many years."

Many of the students earned their own money, working for an entire year, to be able to make the trip.

"Family to Family encourages the youth to pay for it themselves," Haymond said. "It makes it a much more meaningful experience for them."

It was hard work, physical labor to which many of the students were not accustomed. But when asked if they would do it again, their response was immediate.

"Absolutely, without a doubt," said Nicole Bushman. "It was hard work, but it was fun."

"Yes, no question," said Kaytlyn Lofgreen.

They were not the only ones working. In many cases the Mexican families worked alongside the visiting Americans. Haymond gave an example.

"They oftentimes helped with the cement -- mixing, laying or shoveling it," he said. But that was not all.

"As part of the deal, they would come and cook for us," he said. "We serve them and they have an opportunity to serve us. They retain their dignity. Both are blessed for having been a part of it."

Lofgreen said she worked on stove-building every day. "We had a metal mold in a rectangle," she said. "We put ashes then gravel. We poured cement and put a base around the edges. We filled that up with more

cement and ran a pipe for the chimney. When it was set up, we took the mold out then put the rest of the chimney on."

The residents were pleased, to say the least.

"I got to see the people's reactions," she said. "They were so excited they wouldn't let the stove dry before they started cooking on it."

Those stoves made a difference in their lives.

"Some did not have any stoves at all," Lofgreen said. "One lady had a really old rickety one that had a lot of holes in it."

"The first lady was so excited she brought out tortillas for us," she said. "She was genuinely grateful with many smiles and thank you's. They were so thrilled to have this woodburning stove."

Lofgreen said she grew from the experience.

"I learned to love my Mexican brothers and sisters," she said. "They are exactly like me. They just live in a different place and speak a different language."

Bushman spent most of her days on the floor-laying crew.

"We mixed cement," she said. "One of the floors we had to mix it by hand; for the others we had a mixer. We transported it, laid the floor, helped smooth it out. The majority of them were kitchen floors. They were quite a bit smaller than we have here."

There was more to the experience than laying floors and building stoves.

"We gathered people together and went into the forest," Haymond said. "We cleaned trash and painted benches. We had lunch and dances with the youth. It was a marvelous experience."

They also taught hygiene and health seminars, giving soap, toothpaste, toothbrushes, towels and combs to the residents.

"They were so grateful for them," Haymond said.

In addition to service, they took some time out to see the countryside.

"We hiked up to an opal mine," Haymond said. "It was fascinating. The day before we flew out, we went and explored the culture. We drove for three hours into the mountains. We went down into a ravine area where there were gold and silver mines. We discovered some of the most glorious, beautiful areas, with pools and waterfalls."

Bushman told about her reaction to the week.

"It was what I expected," she said. "It was really interesting. It was neat to be able to go and serve the people there. It was neat to be able to talk to the people and kind of understand their stories and what they had experienced during their lifetime."

She gave an example.

"One of the floors we did was for a single mom," she said. "She had three children living with her. She was working a full-time job and trying to make ends meet."

Lofgreen told of another mom she met.

"This lady was the godmother and didn't even know where the mom was," she said. "She also had her own children and a husband. She was taking care of these children without much for her own family."

The examples of the Mexican families provided food for thought to the students.

"I learned the importance of gratitude for what we have," Lofgreen said. "We have so much, even though I have seven siblings that are younger than me and our house is not very big for the standards in America. We saw how little they had, but how happy they were. To see the light in their eyes helped me be grateful for those things that I do have."

More information about Family to Family Humanitarian Expeditions can be found at www.ffhe.org.