Southeastern Louisiana University’s Nursing Study Abroad in Honduras is a service-learning program of short-term medical mission. The program, directed by Melissa Wafer, RN, MSN provides an invaluable dimension to nursing students academic, cultural, and professional development.

In the summer of 2005, the 12-day program was a unique collaboration between SELU School of Nursing, the Universidad Nacional Autonomia de Honduras (UNAH) School of Nursing, and the Episcopal Church of Honduras. The students visited the communities of Guiamaca and Talanga, Honduras. The students worked with local health practitioners, completed home assessments, and provided health education at an orphanage for young boys.

Additionally, the SELU students traveled to the island of Roatan, Honduras and visited Siempre Unidos, a local HIV clinic, a ministry started by the Episcopal Church and funded by AIDS Healthcare Foundation. Immersed in the richness of island’s culture, the students were able to enjoy rest and relaxation at the termination of the program. Overall, the STMM study abroad program provided the opportunity to apply practical nursing skills, assess the impact of global, political, and economic processes on health care systems, and most importantly appreciate the professional nurse’s role in safeguarding the human environment internationally.

Special Thanks to all participants and sponsors

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Humuya Inn: Scott Crook, owner
A Beautiful Country

The Central American country of Honduras, bordering the Caribbean Sea between Guatemala and Nicaragua, is slightly larger in size than Tennessee. Honduras has the second largest population in Central America, with close to 7 million residents. The country of Honduras is one of the poorest in the Western Hemisphere with an unequal distribution of income and unemployment. For that reason, Honduras relies heavily on the economy of the United States for the countries’ growth. Almost half of the population living in Honduras lives on less than one dollar a day. In addition, many areas of Honduras, especially Guaimaca and Talanga, there are major problems with sanitation, running water, and malnutrition. The amount of medical professionals available to the people is limited. With such a beautiful country in need, as nurses we are called to lend a helping hand.

Nursing Students United

Despite communication barriers nursing students from SLU and UNAH join together for a common cause.

Whether a nurse is of Spanish speaking origin or fluent in the English language, the nursing profession remains consistent. Working with the UNAH nursing students brought wonderful opportunities to the SELU nursing students.

Communication seemed to be the most challenging, both student to student and student to patient. UNAH and SELU students paired up and worked together in the clinic and community settings. This unique one-on-one collaboration enriched the program experience for all the nursing students. Importantly, the SELU students felt that the working arrangements helped them to appreciate the unique culture differences in Honduras and the United States, especially the norms of healthcare.

Understanding the culture advanced the mission of the study abroad program and helped the STMM address the needs of the Honduran communities. The chance to unite, work together, and establish a relationship with nursing students in another country was a fun, exciting, and educational experience of a lifetime.
The rooster crows, each foot hits the floor, the bathroom water begins to trickle from the sink, and hands reach in our suitcases to find a set of scrubs to wear for the upcoming day. All the while, families of young, old, healthy and ill steadily form a line outside the church doors. Heads turn as our group arrives at the gates. For three days our medical mission group, which consisted of nursing students from SELU and UNAH, a Honduran doctor, along with a translator and an instructor, set-up clinics in the neighboring towns of Guaimaca and Talanga, Honduras. The clinics held at the Episcopal Church in Guaimaca and Central de Salud in Talanga included a triage station, doctor visit, and a pharmacy. One by one, patients filled out health history form, were triaged by a group of nursing students, and examined by a doctor. Medications for malnutrition, parasites, and primary health problems were supplied by the pharmacy. The clinic doors would close when the last patient was cared for.

Meet a Honduran Family

This case study is presented to illustrate the lives of the families the students met during home assessments. This is the case of a typical Honduran woman, “Norma” (not her real name).

Norma was asked many personal questions, and at first some were met with hesitation. However, after a time trust seemed to build with the group, Norma revealed many personal aspects of her life.

Norma, a life long resident of Guaimaca, is a 32-year-old, single woman with six children. After two abusive marriages, she now lives with her mother, stepfather and her six children (ages 10 months to 12 years old). Norma’s mother supports the family by sewing. The family lives off about 50 limpiras a day, which is the equivalent to three U.S. dollars.

Norma expressed feelings of low self esteem related to her 5th grade education. She stated that she feels like “trash” and has nothing to live for besides her children. Positive comments were made about her role as mother and that she feels happy when she is with her children.

Norma’s home is constructed from wood and clay with dirt floors, no running water, and one light bulb. The house has 2 rooms separated by a sheet: one great room and one bedroom. A wood-burning stove is located just outside as is the outhouse, and water barrels. The water is collected from a community well, is chlorinated, and stored in large barrels. Norma’s family boils their water before drinking or cooking. Their most important meal is lunch and typically consists of bean, rice, and eggs. While the family has a small garden plot in the yard, most food is purchased at a “pulperia”, which is the equivalent of an American convenience store run out of someone’s home. There were some chickens and ducks in Norma’s yard, but she said that the ducks were pets and the chickens were mostly sold for money.

The students taught Norma how to perform self breast exams, the importance of hand washing, and stressed the need for sanitary food preparation. The students stressed the importance of her role as a mother to her children, showing Norma that she was a very valuable and cherished human being.
“Walking through a routine life, I often forget to think of others outside that routine, especially in other countries. It is an ordinary school day for a nursing student, but a new beginning for a servant of God. Entering the building, a Honduras study abroad flyer hanging eye level is noticed with a meeting date and time for more information. Instant intrigue fills as God begins to call. Before stepping foot in the room, it is known...I am here to serve.

A strong sense of excitement grows knowing God's plan for the upcoming events. Paperwork, bills, and the busy semester dims the excitement over time. Continuing to hurry through life, making deadlines, and cramming for tests, trip preparation is set aside.

Without warning months becomes days until departure. Packing and buying last minute necessities, mental preparation begins.

The flight, not nearly as long as expected, leaves a feeling of closeness in proximity to home, but the many differences are yet to come.

The first night's devotion reveals a scriptural anatomy lesson: 1 Corinthians 12 & Romans 12 — one body with many parts, the physiology of the body of Christ.

The first full day in Honduras we go to church. Although the entire service was in Spanish, it is still a powerful experience. Praise and worship is displayed on an overhead projector so even I could follow along and even begin to pick up on the message.

Many shocking sites in many tragically poor cities of Honduras begin to wear on me. Emotions become weak.

Nothing could have prepared me for the cultural and poverty differences.

As the trip continues, I begin to pick up on some of the language, and grow more accustomed to the cultural variations.

Stepping out of the comforts of your routine life presents a chance to get to know yourself. Normal capabilities become a challenge in an unfamiliar place, but we do what we can, learn what we can, and grow from every experience and event in life. After a long twelve days of constant change with slow acclimation to the many new places and things, suddenly the world is flying by at a familiar fast pace...I am home.”

- K. Toomey, SLUSN