VCSU students experience Honduras firsthand

Trip a success despite military coup

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Two Valley City State University students traveled to Honduras this summer as part of a Spanish course.

Cassandra Birchem and Sarah Henderson arrived in Honduras on June 1 and remained there until Aug. 1 and Aug. 12 respectively.

“II wasn’t really sure what to think at first,” said Birchem, a junior from Lisbon, who is majoring in Spanish education. “I was a little nervous about the whole situation because I was told my host families wouldn’t speak English.”

Henderson, a sophomore from Bemidji, Minn., majoring in elementary education and minoring in Spanish, also wondered what she was getting herself into. Her concerns going in were for her safety and what the people would be like.

While the students were in Honduras, the country experienced the first coup in Central America in 16 years.

Honduran President Manual Zelaya was ousted by his own military on June 27 and an interim government was established despite overwhelming and virtually unanimous condemnation by other nations.

“I really enjoyed being able to see history in the making,” said Birchem. “At first, I didn’t know what was happening because I didn’t have a radio or TV that was in English. The first couple days were the worst because everybody was worried and we weren’t able to go out or do anything. The areas that I stayed in and visited didn’t really seem to be affected by it, though, and so I felt safe and comfortable.

“The only time that I was really worried about things was when there was bad news on the TV and when we were pulled over by the cops on one of our trips and I had forgotten to bring my passport with me.”
Despite efforts by the Organization of American States to reinstate Zelaya, as well as several failed attempts to re-enter the country on his own, he remains unable to regain power. Meanwhile, protests by supporters of both factions have led to increased tensions in the region as well as disruptions in travel and some basic services.

“What an interesting experience,” Henderson said. “Half the time I didn’t know what was going on, but everyone said it was fine. My family and friends were more worried than I was.”

The students attended a language school in the Caribbean coastal city of La Ceiba for the first half of their experience, and then put their Spanish-speaking skills and English language-teaching skills into practice in the central region of the country, doing volunteer work for the remainder of the trip.

“The teaching was interesting and I did enjoy it,” said Birchem, who taught English to kindergarteners in a public school as well as to older children through a community education program. “It was easier to teach the older kids because they were able and willing to practice during class on their own and they also seemed more comfortable around me and were willing to ask questions. It was a wonderful experience and I would like to do it again.”

Henderson taught English as well as crafts at an orphanage. “I have never felt so needed at times,” she said.

“Everyone was just so eager to learn new things’ they were such precious children!”

Henderson said the experience in one of the poorest nations in the Western Hemisphere influenced her thoughts on materialistic items as clothes and household items.

I look at some things now and think I don’t need that,” she said. “I had such a close bonding experience with all the children, they seriously became like brothers and even childr4en to me. I will always hold a special place in my heart for all of those kids.”

“I wanted to help people around the world and be able to make the lives of others better,” added Birchem.

“The trip made me realize how nice the states are and how lucky we are to be living here. The entire trip was amazing and I would love to do it again.

“I think that my world and life will never be the same because of the things I saw and experienced.”