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A different spring break for PT students



A Northeastern physical therapy student works with a child from the For His Children Orphanage in Ecuador. *Courtesy photo.*

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As part of a yearlong course, 14 **physical therapy** students spent their spring break at the For His Children Orphanage in Ecuador, working with young patients who have cognitive and physical disabilities.

Physical therapy associate professor Lorna Hayward and clinical professor Ann Charrette led the group of students, who treated children with Down syndrome, cerebral palsy and developmental delay. This fall, Hayward will lead another group of students to Cuernavaca, Mexico, where they'll work at an elder shelter and in two orphanages.

These clinical opportunities for experiential learning are embedded into Northeastern's undergraduate program in physical therapy. At

the Ecuadorian orphanage, the students administered pool therapy, screened children for disabilities and created obstacle courses to help children develop their motor skills.

"It was amazing to work with these kids and see what quick gains they made," said physical therapy student Stephanie Novello, who is in the fifth year of the six-year program.

The experiential learning opportunity gave students a chance to further develop their physical therapy skills through hands-on work, and it may shape their career choices, said Hayward.

"They told me the experience was life-changing," she said, noting that the weeklong trip helped raise students' awareness of a foreign culture and of their role as health care professionals.

"A lot of them might decide to do PT in a developing country," she said.

Novello turned the therapeutic exercises into game play, by asking children to reach for toys or to jump as high as they could in an effort to evaluate their physical development.

"Working with kids is a lot different than working with teens or adults," she said. "If it's not fun, they're not going to do it."

Sometimes the little things made all the difference in the world.

Novello bought a new pair of shoes for a 4 year-old girl with a genetic bone disorder that made walking, let alone running and jumping, nearly impossible.

The shoes realigned her feet, enabling her to walk backward. In May, she'll have corrective surgery on her legs, but Novello's already e-mailed the orphanage a post-operative rehabilitation plan.

There was no limit to what she learned, Novello said, adding, "Nothing I say can do justice to this experience."

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