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Building homes, building a future

Kerry Ross helped build new homes for poor families and taught children English while on co-op in El Salvador. *Courtesy photo.*

June 8, 2010

As one of the first two Northeastern University students to go on **co-op** in El Salvador, Kerry Ross certainly made the most of the experience.

Ross, an **international affairs** major, worked for Epilogos, a nonprofit organization that seeks to improve the lives of impoverished families in Salvadoran villages through community development. The organization addresses issues related to housing, education, food and water supplies, employment and public sanitation.

While on co-op in the village of San Jose Villaneuva from mid-January until early May, Ross taught English to local children and helped build new homes for seven families, some of whom were living in structures made partly of cardboard, tin, and plastic tarps. The new homes, he says, were constructed with cement blocks and painted in vibrant colors, giving these families safer and more welcoming places to live.

Ross says the experiential learning opportunity was “life-altering,” giving him a whole new outlook on life as he encountered needy families rising above the adversity they face.

“Every house that I went into, people offered me food. Little kids were giving me so much. It was from people who couldn’t afford three meals a day,” Ross says. “They were poor. They didn’t have clothes. But the children had such genuine laughter. It’s something I’ll never forget.”

Ross is already planning to make good on that pledge. After he graduates in December, he plans to return to El Salvador to establish a local business for the community to make and sell ponchos, which he hopes will keep the people dry during the rainy season. He was inspired by the realization that many children there walk to school in the pouring rain and often show up ready to learn but drenched.

Toward the end of his co-op, Ross guided a visiting loan officer from a microfinance institution throughout the town, showing him small businesses that could be strong candidates for loans.

Coincidentally, the work prepared Ross for his next global experience with Northeastern — a **Social Enterprise Institute** Field Study Program in Belize and the Dominican Republic working with two other microfinance institutions to help survey potential borrowers.

“This past month really showed me what you can do if you go abroad,” he says.

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