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Appreciating a life, and a life's work



Stephany Reyes-Seri (center) and other Northeastern students traveled to the Dominican Republic for a Dialogue of Civilizations experience. Courtesy photo.

August 4, 2010

When Stephany Reyes-Seri was growing up, her mother often reminded her to appreciate everything she had because many children in the Dominican Republic would give anything for the same opportunities afforded her.

Reyes-Seri had visited her mother's hometown of Santo Domingo, but the Northeastern business major had never seen the extreme poverty that exists in areas outside the capital. That is, until earlier this year, when she worked in those poor communities as part of a field study through Northeastern's Social Enterprise Institute—an experience Reyes-Seri said changed her life.

Her group—which included 34 Northeastern students and three staff members—worked with Esperanza International, a microfinance organization that provides small business loans and business training to low-income residents in the Dominican Republic. Reyes-Seri visited a sugarcane plantation where workers, mainly Haitian immigrants, made around \$6 a week.

Reyes-Seri's group interviewed about 200 borrowers about their businesses and training, their financial recordkeeping practices, and their understanding of basic business and economic concepts. Her group analyzed the responses and offered Esperanza insight into best practices and recommendations for improving aspects of the loan programs and business training.

Reyes-Seri also took morning classes to learn about microfinance and what makes the enterprises sustainable. And prior to her 16-day visit to the Dominican Republic, she spent two weeks in Belize doing similar work for a different microfinance institution.

Before she left for the trip, Reyes-Seri admits she struggled to decide her post-graduation direction. But after seeing how microfinance could lift impoverished residents' spirits as well as their financial status, she left with a much clearer picture. She hopes to return to the Dominican Republic to help the many in need who lack opportunities to succeed in business.

"This experience has had a tremendous impact on me, and whatever I do in the future has to be related to improving the lives of the poor," said Reyes-Seri, who is preparing to enter her senior year at Northeastern this fall.

On a more personal note, she says the experience in the Dominican Republic helped her forge a stronger connection to home.

"I never lived in the Dominican Republic, but growing up in a household in which merengue and bachata [music] was always played really loud, I definitely felt a connection. All the foods we eat are traditional Dominican dishes. When visiting relatives I would hear stories about 'back home,'" she said. "I always was and still am proud to say I am Dominican and embrace every aspect of the culture."

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