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Positive change can be child's play



Northeastern student Ellie Deshaies, left, with a student at Ocean Academy's Sports Day.

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A "toxic swamp" lurked beneath the feet of more than a dozen high school students at Ocean Academy in Caye Caulker, Belize.

Northeastern University student Ellie Deshaies carefully observed every step.

She instructed the intrepid travelers to cross the wetlands using a paper plank. If a student's foot touched the ground, the game was over.

It was just one small part of Deshaies' spring co-op, helping some 15 students transform their community through service projects grounded in teamwork, communication and problem solving skills acquired by playing interactive games like toxic swamp.

The experiential learning opportunity inspired her to pursue a career in international development.

"I definitely want to do another international co-op," says Deshaies, a third-year **international affairs** major. "Education was never on my radar, but teaching these students made me realize that I would love to work in a developing community in another country."

Deshaies connected with Ocean Academy through Northeastern's student group Peace through Play, which was named Student Organization of the Year for 2010 by the Office for Student Affairs and Student Activities, Leadership & Scholarship.

The club works with campus organizations, local schools and global NGO's on initiatives aimed at eradicating youth violence.

Deshaies, guided by Peace through Play's Leaders and Changemakers of Tomorrow curriculum at Ocean Academy, encouraged students to become positive agents of change in their community by addressing important social issues.

She oversaw one group of students who cleaned up trash from a local beach and posted a video of the experience on YouTube to the tune of the Beatles' "Here Comes the Sun." Another group of students created an in-class talk show that focused on teen pregnancy, drug use and violence in the community.

The class projects improved the students' image among a large number of community members who "don't see them doing positive things or working toward bettering the community," says Deshaies.

Some students enjoyed the class discussions, games and projects so much so that they joined a community service club at the school.

"The students were great," says Deshaies. "I learned a lot about education and teaching from being on the other side of the classroom."

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