

# Learning and Serving

by Chris Mercogliano

It never ceases to amaze me how in a matter of hours you can be transported into another world. In our case, we lifted off a New York City runway not long after sunrise and by noon were on a poor people's beach just outside the city limits of San Juan.

This morning I awaken in chilly darkness to the sounds of Tita preparing breakfast for her husband, whose construction job begins at seven. Judging by her noisy briskness and economy of motion, I sense that this must be a daily ritual here. Soon Tita and Davy are talking in low tones, with the scraping of the spatula on a skillet and the glukking of the coffee maker for accompaniment. My limited

Spanish allows me to pick out only a few words from the conversation, making its music all the more noticeable. Theirs is such an expressive language, so full of nuance. Tita operates on several octaves interchangeably. Davy speaks in a gravelly tenor, his larynx coated with years of cement dust, but he appears to communicate emotion with variations in cadence.

I imagine they are having the kind of exchange spouses typically have first thing in the morning, about the needs of the household, getting the kids to school, and today, how to accommodate all of the guests who have come to help them repair their storm-ravaged home.

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*Recently, there seems to be increased interest in a concept that has come to be known as "service learning," a hands-on approach to teaching and learning in which students engage themselves in some type of service-or-community-oriented project as part of their study. Although neither the concept nor the practice of "service learning" (a rather odd and a not altogether clear name) is new, our increasing awareness of the importance of service-oriented learning is refreshing. Indeed, the wider practice of this form of teaching and learning gives us hope that, in the face of increasingly impersonal educational paths being pursued nationwide (witness, for example, the increase in curricular standardization and conformity, as well as the concomitant increase in standardized testing), growing numbers of teachers and students are finding value in pursuing personal, human, and humane "educational" endeavors that unite us all.*

*In the following article, longtime alternative educator Chris Mercogliano, from the Albany Free School, in Albany, NY, gives us an indication of just how meaningful and valuable this practice can be—for the students, for the teachers, and for those who are helped (who as Chris so beautifully demonstrates, are also teachers in their own right). If you, too, have a story to tell involving service-oriented learning, we encourage you to share it with us for publication consideration. Please send your manuscript to the editor at the address located on p. 1 of the magazine.*

Tita and Davy are locked in an ongoing battle with nature. Twice in little more than a decade their unusual mountain village—the story of which I will tell shortly—has borne the brunt of major hurricanes. Their first house, a ten-by-ten scrap plywood and tin shack, was no match for the fury of Hugo, in 1989. But, the young couple was undaunted. They took their federal hurricane relief check and began pursuing their dream of building a storm-proof home out of cinder block and concrete.

I can feel the pride of accomplishment in every gesture as Davy gives me a tour of the house. But, when I ask about the bright blue tarp covering the roof, a look of sadness flashes across his face. In his Bronx-accented English, he launches into the story of the last hurricane to rip through the village: George, in 1998. Apparently, this storm spawned a series of small tornadoes up here in the mountains, and Davy could only watch helplessly as one of the funnels careened toward the sturdy work-in-progress into which he and Tita had poured so much time, energy and sweat. Other nearby houses were spared, but not theirs, which took a direct hit. The last thing Davy saw before joining his wife and two small children in the concrete storm cellar was his corrugated steel roof sailing off into oblivion.

The aluminum shutter windows so typical in tropical buildings were no match for a category four hurricane either. The relentless winds smashed their way in and absconded with most of the house's contents. Only the refrigerator and chest freezer were able to stand their ground.

Six months passed before Davy and Tita had the heart to reenter their battered home to assess the

losses. Then, their grief and fear mostly behind them, they decided not only to repair the damage, but also to parlay new hurricane relief funds into making the house even bigger and stronger than before.

If determination could be measured like hurricanes and earthquakes, then Davy and Tita's would be off the scale. Somehow—I can't explain why—they seem perfectly at peace with the two steps forward, one step back nature of their quest to create for themselves a safe, spacious, comfortable home, something most of us take for granted back in my world.

The answer, Davy tells me, is to roof the new addition they have begun constructing with reinforced concrete, no small task in this remote village. The job will require days of tedious concrete making with a small gasoline-powered cement mixer.

Which is where we come in, seven seventh- and eighth-grade students and two teachers from an inner-city free school in Albany, NY—though first Tita has asked us to build a retaining wall to halt the storm erosion that is undermining the house across the road. These kids are no strangers to determination either. They raised over \$8,000 to make this two-week trip possible, holding benefit dinners, raffles, and publishing an impressive forty-page magazine for which they sold \$1,500 worth of ads to local businesses. With help from their sewing teacher, three of the girls spent several months fashioning a queen-size quilt out of six hundred small squares that they meticulously cut from beautiful scraps of material donated by a nearby textile mill. Supporters purchased over a thousand one-dollar tickets in the competition to become the quilt's future owner.



The work here is anything but glamorous. First, the mud from the slide caused by Hurricane George has to be cut back and removed. This means picking and shoveling tons of the ubiquitous red clay, always with the searing tropical sun bearing down on us. But, the kids are up to the challenge. By the time Davy returns from work at three-thirty, the site has been entirely prepared for the sixteen-foot-long by six-foot-high retaining wall. He is indeed impressed.

The following morning, we set in on building the plywood forms for the wall. Ruel Bernard, founder of the Albany, NY-based organization known as Building Community, which has been

working alongside residents of this village for the past eight years, instructs several of the kids in cutting rebar.

These are the steel reinforcing rods that will give the wall the necessary strength. The idea is to cut a little more than halfway through the rebar with a circular saw and special masonry blade, and then snap the pieces off. The rest of the kids help Tita set in place and level the form for the wall's twenty-four inch-wide footing.

Now the real fun begins. It takes all eleven of us to wheel the heavy mixer down the steep grade from a neighbor's house and into place near the wall project, where there is already a pile of crushed stone and another of masonry sand that Tita and Davy have been using to make concrete for their house. We divide up into three groups. One hurriedly fills rubber buckets with stones, while another digs into the sand. As fast as we can, we hand the full buckets to Ruel, who is wearing ear protection against the roaring rattle and clank of the machine. He heaves the sand and stone, along with bags of Portland cement, into the spinning cylinder. Water from a hose supplied by tanks on the roof of the house we are trying to save turns the mix into a lumpy, gray stew. Finished batches are turned out onto the road, to be shoveled into a wheelbarrow by the third group and then rushed down to Tita, waiting with trowel in hand. It is said that she can lay block and pour concrete with the best of them.

The process takes a sweaty, frenetic ninety minutes. We are all

bone-tired, but our sense of accomplishment is more than equal to our exhaustion. This was a real display of teamwork and coordination. Ruel is pleased with the grit of this motley mix of budding teenagers, and isn't shy about telling them so.

As soon as the tools and mixer are cleaned of cement residue, the kids return to being kids again. Dearon and Kenny, two African-American boys from the inner-city, have borrowed the plastic go-cart belonging to Tita's kids so that they can join a group of youths who are busy racing down the roughly paved hill with anything that rolls. Isaac, the third boy in the class, is still preparing lunch. He lives in the country about thirty miles outside Albany and was the first to awaken and join Ruel on the job this morning. Unfortunately, he slipped and fell hard, and his sprained wrist kept him from participating in today's pour. Instead, he and Adrena have volunteered for kitchen duty. The oldest girl in the class, Adrena suffers from chronic lower back pain, which kept her from helping with the concrete, too. Hannah, Sarah and Nicole have decided to work on their tans. They are lying out in a corner of Davy and Tita's well-kept front yard, one in the string hammock, the other two in the grass on either side. The three quickly fall asleep, and after a time I awaken them and urge them to come in out of the sun before they overdo it.

After a late mid-day meal, plus a short *siesta*, we all grab bathing suits, towels and toiletries and load into the van for the fifteen-minute ride to El Verde, part of

Puerto Rico's rain forest national park. Here, in a setting befitting a Tarzan movie, we swim and wash away the day's sweat and grime. Because water only occasionally flows from the taps in the village, this will be a functional, as well as a pleasurable, daily visit.

Several local boys have accompanied us to the river. They begin ascending the rocky ledges overlooking the waterfall-fed pool, and in turns leap from a narrow perch about ten feet above the water. Kenny is the first of our kids to follow them up. After a long moment of indecision, he pinches his nose between his thumb and forefinger and plunges downward. When his head bobs to the surface, his face is one big smile. There is applause all around. Nicole, a sturdy girl and one of the morning's best workers, is the next daredevil, followed by Hannah, who is Irish but was raised in Brunei. I suspect that the boys from the village are concealing their awe at the bravery of these young *gringas*. Next is Sandy, my co-chaperone. She is a graduate student in her mid-thirties, and is basing her Ph.D. dissertation on field research she has been doing at our school for the past year. Everyone is surprised to see her up on the ledge. A tireless worker, too, she leaps without hesitation, earning her own outburst of cheers.

We frolic in the brisk water for about an hour and then return for a sumptuous Puerto Rican meal that Tita has been preparing in our absence. Large quantities of *arroz con habichuelas y pollo* (rice with beans and chicken) and

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salad are consumed by the famished work crew. It is a fitting end to a very good day.

This morning, the line of groggy heads settled into the back of the couch on Tita's front porch reflects the lingering weariness from yesterday's heavy work. Signs of homesickness are beginning to emerge as well. Kenny is quite articulate about his sentiments: "Chris, I want to go home—now. I miss my mother and my sister. And my dog."

Ruel tells us that today will be a light day. All we have to do is construct the form for the wall itself and install it with enough bracing to withstand the pressure of the concrete we will pour in on Monday morning, after the new load of sand and stone are delivered. But, when he asks for volunteers to go to another building site in the village to scrounge 2x4s and plywood for the form, there is a collective groan. The romance of doing construction work to serve others is wearing off fast.

With a little cajoling, four kids drive off in the van with Tita to fetch the needed materials. Those who remain behind are increasingly vocal about their distaste for the idea of working again today. Dearon asks Ruel why we are doing this work in the first place. And more to the point: Why don't the neighboring boys have to help, too? *They* live here, not us. Dearon spent his first six years in Jamaica before emigrating to Albany with his mother and younger sister. He is wonderfully unguarded, rarely hiding his thoughts or feelings.

Ruel acknowledges the importance—and the complexity—of Dearon's question. He easily could have deflected him by preaching about the importance of helping others, and about the satisfaction that results from doing so, but that isn't Ruel's



photos Sandra Winn

style. He tells Dearon that in order to answer him adequately he will have to relate the story of how this village came to be. He suggests that tonight might be a good time for that.

It turns out to be perfect. Thanks to the day's less physically challenging work and the revitalizing waters of the river, everyone is still feeling fresh and alert after dinner. Once the dishes are done and the leftovers put away, Sandy and I round up the kids for Ruel's talk. Only Kenny refuses to join in. Still missing home, he registers his protest by half-listening from his perch on the swing out by the gate.

Ruel takes us back to 1940, when the non-elected Puerto Rican legislature passed the Land Reform Act. A portion of land was to be taken from large property holders and given to those who had none. This attempt at economic justice had two outcomes, both of them negative: First, tens of thousands of people living in semi-feudal conditions on large sugar cane plantations were displaced and forced into the cities in search of non-existent jobs; second, the government never redistributed the land.

By 1950, more than a hundred thousand newly-urban poor were squatting in the large mangrove swamps surrounding San Juan.

Finally, in 1980, a group of several hundred families decided to take matters into their own hands by occupying one of the government parcels not far to the east. Despite official demands to vacate immediately, they pushed on, methodically subdividing the land into housing plots, laying out roads, and helping each other fashion makeshift dwellings that could hardly be called houses. A church was established, as well as a meeting space and several stores.

They agreed on a name: Villa Sin Miedo—Village Without Fear.

Here Ruel stops his narrative to stress that this bold, well-organized group was determined from the start to act as a true community. The land was to be held in common, with individuals only owning their homes. It was by working together, making decisions together, and staying together, he explained, that they were able to make so much out of nothing.

The story resumes. The government continued demanding that the residents of the Villa disband and move out. The leaders were arrested repeatedly, a reaction that only strengthened the group's resolve. Not only did they refuse to leave, but they also began pressuring the government to grant them title to their muddy, hand-built village. And they didn't stop there. They made the government's failure to follow through on the Land Reform Act a national issue, and encouraged the formation of a coalition of theirs and other such "land rescues," as the act of mass squatting came to be known.

The Governor of Puerto Rico responded with increased police harassment and threats to forcibly evict the community. Ironically, at the same time that the Legislature in San Juan was debating a bill to grant Villa Sin

Miedo its land title, an eviction order was working its way through the local courts. The courts were faster, and early one morning in May, 1982, the Governor commanded police to force their way into the Villa and destroy it.

The invasion was carefully planned. Hundreds of military-style officers, armed with M16s and incendiary grenades, and backed up by helicopters and bulldozers, moved in just after dawn. All means of escape were sealed off. It is widely believed that it was only the presence of national and international media that prevented the occurrence of atrocities.

After the police rounded up all of the residents in one location,

the community made a daring move: They began to march *en masse* down the highway to San Juan. Word of the day's events quickly spread to the capital, where labor unions dispatched trucks to ferry the marchers—who had since been joined by hundreds of supporters—into the city. The convoy proceeded to the Capitol, where, once the residents of Villa Sin Miedo had reassembled, they marched in and occupied the building. They refused to leave until the government agreed to allow them to return to the land—with title.

Three days passed. A second confrontation with police forces was averted when an Episcopalian church offered the community a year's use of a



piece of vacant rural property that it owned, about an hour from San Juan. This would buy time for further negotiations.

Vindicated, at least for now, the entire community resettled and started over. It turned out, however, to be one of the rainiest years in recent memory. The new site was located near a swamp, and the mosquitoes were unbearable. Added to the physical discomfort there was the frustration caused by the government's complete silence on the land issue. One by one, families began to drift away, tired of being cooped up in rain-soaked tents. As the end of the year-long land loan neared, only fifty families remained.

Throughout this period, the leadership of the community had been lobbying the support of religious and political organizations. The work finally paid off: A coalition of groups presented Villa Sin Miedo with a donation of \$50,000.

A search committee came across an abandoned coffee plantation that was for sale in the Luquillo Mountains, about forty miles southeast of San Juan. The price was low because the rain forest terrain would make development extremely difficult. The steep hills were blanketed with large trees and a dense tangle of undergrowth. Used to challenges that most would consider absurd, Villa Sin Miedo made an offer anyway, which was accepted.

The fifty families moved their tents onto their new land and began clearing sites for permanent houses. Roads had to be built, without the aid of heavy equipment. As they had the first time around, the residents decided that the land would be owned by the community. Everyone would receive an equal-sized plot on which to build their own homes, which, due to the lack of

cash, would again be crude dwellings made out of found materials.

Although Ruel has been talking for nearly half an hour, he hasn't lost anyone's attention. Dearon, whose question precipitated tonight's session, is the only one who worried me. His fidgeting has been increasing steadily. Until last year an unsuccessful student in schools where history is so often turned into a dry and lifeless subject, he has already been listening longer than might be expected.

**“....why are we doing this work...”**

Ruel continues: Once everyone in the Villa had a roof over their heads, the focus turned toward the need for a common gathering space. A local rural development agency offered to fund the construction of a community center. Plans were drawn for a building large enough to hold meetings and social events for the fledgling village's entire population, and more importantly perhaps, for it to be made out of reinforced concrete.

The reason for this last detail would soon become apparent. In the fall of 1989, civil defense authorities drove up to the Villa to warn that a killer hurricane was approaching, and to advise everyone to evacuate immediately to a Red Cross emergency shelter in the valley.

A community meeting was hastily called. After an intense discussion, the entire community elected to ride out the storm right there in the community center.

Hugo zeroed in on the mountains around Villa Sin Miedo. When the walls of the community center-turned-hurricane shelter began to tremble from the force of the wind, the inhabitants took

turns holding sheets of plywood, which had been serving as temporary partitions between families, against the walls to keep them from collapsing inward.

The walls held. When the storm had finally passed and people stuck their heads tentatively out of the building, they witnessed unfathomable devastation. Whatever trees hadn't blown over were stripped of every leaf or frond. Only scant traces remained of the shacks they had been living in for the past five years.

The Red Cross would later declare that Villa Sin Miedo's shelter was the best run on the entire island.

The final wrinkle in the story involves the Villa's application to the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) for hurricane relief funds. FEMA initially determined that the Villa was ineligible because the residents did not hold individual titles to their property. Perhaps FEMA didn't realize with whom it was dealing. The community appointed delegates to reason with the agency, which soon reversed its decision and awarded the Villa enough money to make at least a start on hurricane-proof block and concrete houses. Hugo was literally the silver lining inside the cloud.

Which, Ruel interjects, is what brought him onto the scene: He had read about the hurricane's punishment of Puerto Rico, where he had gone on a fondly remembered hitchhiking tour a few years earlier. He was a carpenter by trade and wanted to see what he could do to help. First, he traveled to Vieques, a small offshore island that had also been wrecked. While he was there, he learned about Villa Sin Miedo, that it was in urgent need of help to rebuild its housing stock with funds that would only

cover the cost of materials. Upon hearing the Villa's incredible story, he suddenly had a vision of bringing other Americans to this community to assist with its recovery efforts.

Ruel made his way to Villa Sin Miedo, where he witnessed firsthand the residents' solidarity, a carry-over political term from the sixties that is Ruel's preferred way of describing strong unity in a group. It was there that he decided to call his organization Building Community. Its mission: To work with—not for—those in need, creating a spirit of mutual aid in the process. He also chose to make Villa Sin Miedo his base of operations.

Dearon, unable to sit still any longer, has drifted off before getting to hear an explicit answer to his question. He and Kenny are back playing in the road with the local boys.

Ruel has sensed, rightly so, I think, that Dearon's question was everyone else's as well. "The reason we are here," he explains to the remaining group, "is to help keep alive the solidarity, the strong sense of community, that built this village in the first place. Every time Building Community shows up and begins a new project, such as the one we have taken on, it provides yet another opportunity for people to work together. It also," he adds, "tends to spur Villa residents to initiate needed projects of their own."

As for Villa kids not joining in, Ruel reminds the class that the local children have to go to school during the day, and that this afternoon a few did stop by to help with the construction of the form. He finishes this point by stressing the importance of the local children witnessing the kind of hard work and cooperation that has enabled their parents and grandparents to sustain Villa Sin Miedo. The next genera-

tion of leaders will have to come from their age group, just as Tita, who was fifteen when it all began, emerged from the last. What Ruel wants my kids to understand is that it isn't just the physical labor they are doing here this week that is valuable, but also the modeling of hard work and cooperation.

**"They agreed on a name:  
Villa Sin Miedo—  
Village Without Fear"**

Ruel concludes by noting the absence of Dearon and Kenny, and then by saying that what they are doing right now—making connections with the Villa kids through play—is a very important step in building community. He is talking about community on a broader scale now, the bridging of different cultures. This is something that will be happening more and more as the week wears on.

The sand and stone arrive on schedule, meaning that today we can fill the heavily braced form with concrete. It's going to be a formidable task. The wall will require our mixing and hauling—this time in individual buckets—three or four times more concrete than the footing. A half dozen adults of all different ages from the Villa, plus two Americans who worked with Building Community seven years ago and arrived yesterday afternoon, have volunteered to assist with the pour.

One of the helpers is Tita's mother. Her face is that of a woman in her sixties, but her well-muscled body is that of someone much younger. It announces that she has mixed and moved more than her share of concrete in this life.

Kenny and Dearon ask if they can start the motor on the mixer this time. Ruel shows them how

to wrap the rope around the pulley. After a dozen or so increasingly effective tries, the motor gives a few hopeful chugs. The next yank yields half a dozen. Finally it catches, and Ruel adjusts the idle.

We divide ourselves into three groups again. The presence of the others enables us to form a semi-bucket brigade to pass the heavy pailfuls of concrete down to the waiting form. Young, sore muscles strain against the weight. As soon as one batch has been scooped up and tossed down into the form, another is ready to be turned out onto the road. The form is about two-thirds filled by lunchtime. We jointly agree to push on and try to finish before we stop to eat. But then misfortune strikes. The downward pressure of the concrete begins forcing the form up off of the footing. About half of the concrete from the downhill section of the wall rushes out from under before we are able to add more bracing and staunch the flow.

Vellon, a neighbor who is running the mixer this time, shouts to Ruel that to be safe we should take a break and allow the concrete in the form to set up. Otherwise, he warns, the problem may recur and more concrete will be lost. Two steps forward, one step back, I mutter to myself. I was hoping that lunch would signal the end of this backbreaking job.

After the meal, we take advantage of the time off and get out the tents that Ruel has offered to lend us for the next leg of our trip, following the week in Villa Sin Miedo. We plan to spend a couple of days beach camping on the offshore island of Vieques, so that the kids can have a taste of the Caribbean, and so that we can find out more about the recent controversy over the

United States Navy's use of two-thirds of the small island municipality for munitions storage and bombing practice. We have been following the issue in the news for the past few months and want to see what Vieques natives have to say about it.

Everyone regathers at three to complete the pour. It's a real act of will to get going again. Thankfully, this time there are no mishaps. We are all done by five, and while the rest of us are cleaning tools and buckets, the kids are happily scratching their names into the top of the wall they have just helped to build.

After dinner the kids go off to build more community. A group of Villa boys has invited our seven to play kickball with them on the lighted basketball court, which Villa residents built a number of years ago. It's been interesting how, the longer we stay, the more the two groups are merging together. It's like watching a deck of cards being shuffled

very slowly. I am impressed at the way everyone is coping with the language barrier. The Free School kids' little bit of Spanish and the Villa kids' modicum of English are going a long way.

This time it is Sarah and Nicole who put a dent in the *machismo* of the local boys. Both very athletic, the girls consistently pound the ball over the wall at one end of the court for home runs, something the slender Puerto Rican boys are able to do only occasionally. The girls carry their superiority graciously, but the older boys begin to boil over with frustration anyway, loudly blaming each other for the lopsided score. Before things get out of hand, someone wisely suggests mixing up the teams.

The next morning at breakfast we discuss the gender-related cultural difference that we've observed, in which we've noticed that only the boys come around the house, except for a couple of nearby six-year-old girls who

play with Tita's daughter. Ruel explains that in Latino culture, especially in the countryside, girls are kept close to home where they are expected to help their mothers with household affairs. Only the boys are allowed to roam free.

What else are these seventh- and eighth-graders learning by serving others in this very different world, sixteen hundred miles from home? Starting with the obvious, they are indeed discovering how good it feels inside to help those in need, to work alongside them to improve the condition of their lives. Included in the bargain is an unforgettable lesson in the power of cooperation. Though it was by no means easy, the job of pouring the wall went much faster than the kids had ever expected, thanks to the presence of so many helping hands.

Additionally, by living under third world conditions, the kids are enjoying a vacation from



technology and an encounter with nature instead. Without things like televisions and Play Stations to occupy them, they are spending the majority of their time out of doors. When they aren't playing games, they are exploring the forest and encountering all sorts of unusual birds and creepy crawlies, as well as beautiful flora, fauna and wild fruit.

And they now know beyond a doubt—after carrying bucket after bucket for flushing toilets from an outside storage barrel—that water weighs approximately eight pounds per gallon. The conservation of resources has suddenly taken on a whole new meaning for them.

On a more subtle level, the kids are being appreciated and honored for making a valuable contribution to the world around them, something American children are often deprived of in a modern, high-tech society in which so much is done for them, and in which there is so little opportunity for them to participate in the real life of the town or city where they live. To this end, Tita has been showing her gratitude in many ways, ones that don't require a common language: braiding and beading Kenny's long hair, weaving a string and bead necklace for Dearon, washing the girls' filthy work clothes, teaching Sandy how to cook Puerto Rican-style, preparing meal after delicious meal.

Also, by being away from home for two weeks in such an unfamiliar environment, the kids are finding out that they have inner resources they can tap into in order to maintain their sense of equilibrium. And that they also have each other for support. I have traveled with kids this age many times over the years, and I am always profoundly moved by

how bonded the groups become as a result of our sharing these kinds of experiences.

I am reminded of the adolescent rites of passage of pre-literate peoples around the world that are receiving so much attention these days. Separation from home and all that is familiar, some sort of perceived danger and the accompanying fear, and hardship or challenge are common elements of all such rituals, regardless of the culture. All three ingredients will present themselves during our two weeks abroad. For some of the kids, flying constitutes the danger; for others, the darkness of the nights or being so far from home. The distance, with an ocean in between, combines with the length of our visit to the island to generate a profound sense of separation. And thanks to the hard work and Spartan living conditions, the inner-city kids from our school are experiencing more hardship and challenge than they have ever known in their relatively pampered American lives.

**“And they now know beyond a doubt—after carrying bucket after bucket for flushing toilets from an outside storage barrel—that water weighs approximately eight pounds per gallon. The conservation of resources has suddenly taken on a whole new meaning for them.”**

None of us can believe how quickly the week has flown by. Unfortunately, the construction of the wall has taken longer than Ruel had anticipated, and the only work we have been able to do on Tita and Davy's house is to form up one of the concrete beams that will support the new roof. The kids have fallen so in love with Tita, who has become

everyone's surrogate mother, that I think they wanted to make more of a contribution right here.

Tita throws us a farewell party on our last night in Villa Sin Miedo—yet another display of gratitude. She grills up a massive pile of *pinchos*, or chicken shish kabobs, and lays out a spread of chips and soda to go with them. We all eat to the point of bursting. The sadness of parting lingers in the air.

The celebration winding down, Ruel floats the question whether we would like to return next week to paint the wall. He will have the forms off by then and the concrete will be sufficiently cured. The answer, not surprisingly, is a unanimous yes. We decide that we will return to Puerto Rico after we visit Vieques for four or five days of touring, and that we will seek out Adrena's grandmother and grandfather on the far western end of the island. Her father, who died when she was a little girl, was Puerto Rican, and she hasn't seen his parents for years. Then we will head back to Villa Sin Miedo for the final twenty-four hours of our trip.

The wall is first to greet us on our return to the Villa, shining white in the afternoon sun. While we were gone, Ruel not only removed the forms, but he also invited the best mason in the village to stucco over the concrete with a special mortar coating. Willie is such an expert that he has managed to erase entirely the bulge caused by the leak. Ruel and the other two American visitors then primed it with a base coat.

Now, our kids can apply the finishing touches. They had a mural-planning discussion during the van ride up into the mountains and agreed on a design: a large Puerto Rican flag

in the center of the wall, with Villa Sin Miedo written on one side and Albany Free School on the other. In larger letters will be the word *solidaridad*—in solidarity. Space will be left under our school's name for other Building Community groups to sign in before they leave.

**“The reason we are here... is to help keep alive the solidarity, the strong sense of community, that built this village in the first place.”**

Tita locates a small flag to serve as a template, and Ruel helps the young artists to project an

enlarged outline onto the wall. They are just about done when I get back from the hardware store with the proper color paints and enough brushes for everyone. The job goes quickly, propelled by a prideful sense of completion. While the kids fill in the stripes and single star on the flag, Sandy, an expert calligrapher, does the lettering.

Tita joins us just as we're stepping back to take in the magnificence of the mural. She sums up her approval in one word: *Buenissimo!*

Ruel is especially pleased by the way the wall project turned out to be such a joint effort.

There is talk now of turning the house we have just helped to save, which has been mostly unoccupied for several years, into a computer learning center for the children of Villa Sin Miedo. In any event, the wall/mural is a permanent symbol of cooperation. Sitting prominently at a “T” intersection in the road to this section of the Villa, it will serve as a vivid reminder of the time we spent here, learning and serving.

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## Resources on Learning Through Service and Travel

Compiled by Robin Martin

### Service Learning Resources

**Building Community** - the Free School's connection for service projects in Puerto Rico. For ten years, Building Community has been organizing community service, service learning and solidarity projects in Puerto Rico, Guatemala, and the United States. Contact: Ruel Bernard, phone: (518) 872-9601, e-mail: ruel43@aol.com

**CommunityService.com** - as per their web site, this organization is "designed to facilitate partnerships between volunteers and non-profit organizations. It provides a forum for matching volunteers' interests and capabilities with the needs of non-profit organizations to enhance community service in areas including education, health and human services, and culture and the arts." You can search the web site by zip code for volunteer opportunities in your area, and will likely find many national opportunities posted by VolunteerMatch.com and ServeNet.org, such as work with Habitat for Humanity and much more. <http://www.CommunityService.com>

**Idealist** - can help with brainstorming other types of community service activities. It searches the postings and listings of 20,000 non-profit organizations in 150 countries. When I searched organizations using the keywords "student community service," for example, it found 157 records — most of which look quite interesting. In addition, you can use its specialized volunteer search (listed as "Volunteer Opportunities" under "Take Action") to seek particular types of opportunities in particular parts of the world. <http://www.idealist.org/>

**The John Dewey Project on Progressive Education** is conducting extensive case study research into the effectiveness of nine service learning programs in the state of Vermont. It is called the Democracy and Education: Schools and Communities Research Project and is grounded in the belief that education is for the purpose of preparing students for living in a democratic society. <http://www.uvm.edu/~dewey/>

**UCLA Service Learning Clearinghouse** - lists many articles and other publications, especially for teachers, about building effective SL programs. This clearinghouse lists many (mainstream) organizations that could be especially helpful to teachers who must develop an academic or curricular focus. In reviewing this type of literature, be wary of the school-to-work rhetoric. It may sound promising, but often the motivations are more economics-focused than student-centered. <http://www.gseis.ucla.edu/slc/k16.html>

### Programs for Students Traveling Abroad

**Center for Interim Programs** - offers individualized services for older high school students and adults to "pursue structured alternatives to formal education or work by matching clients' interests with over 3,000 internships, apprenticeships, volunteer positions, and cultural study programs worldwide." <http://www.interimprograms.com/>

**Cultural Homestay International** - "A non-profit organization founded in 1980 to promote international understanding, friendship, and goodwill through cultural homestays." (Homestays are when students visit other countries and arrange to stay with host families for a set amount of time, often from a week to a year in duration.) Contact: 104 Butterfield Road, San Anselmo, California, 94960, United States; Phone: (415) 459-5397; e-mail [chimain@msn.com](mailto:chimain@msn.com). <http://www.chinet.org>

**Global Works, Inc.** - offers summer service projects for students ages 14 to 18. Includes community service trips to Puerto Rico and many other parts of the world. Mailing address: RD2 Box 356B, Huntingdon, PA 16652 USA, Phone: (814) 667-2411. <http://www.globalworksinc.com/>

**Living Classrooms Foundation** - works with schools and community organizations to provide experience-based educational programs emphasizing the applied learning of math, science, language arts, history, economics, and ecology. Location: 802

South Caroline Street, Baltimore, Maryland, 21231, United States; Contact Person: Jennifer Heatwole; Phone: 410-685-0295. <http://www.livingclassrooms.org/>

**Servas International** - "an international network of hosts and travelers building peace by providing opportunities for personal contact between people of diverse cultures and backgrounds." Operating for over 50 years, Servas has an established track record. For an annual fee of \$65, you can travel to and among their over 14,000 home stay connections in 135 countries. Visit their Travel with a Purpose: International Traveler Information web page for more details. In the U.S., contact United States Servas, Inc, 11 John Street, Suite 407, New York, NY 10038-4009. Phone: 212-267-0252. For contacts outside the U.S., visit the Servas web site or e-mail: [servas-info@servas.org](mailto:servas-info@servas.org). <http://www.servas.org>

### Resources for Designing Your Own Travel Abroad Programs

In addition to the often-used Lonely Planet travel guides and other materials that you will find in the travel section of your local library or bookstore, here are some online resources that may be worth investigating:

**About International Education** - describes an array of study abroad programs, reviewed by Lucile Vea, an expert in international learning experiences. In particular, there is a study abroad section, where you can browse programs by regions of the world or by subject. Includes a special section for high school programs, as well as a financial aid section. Also nice sections on Tools for Teachers and Tools for Students, which include links to a 3D Atlas, environmental news networks, "dangerous places," and more. <http://internationaleled.about.com/>

**Budget Travel** - for budget-type travelers, includes long lists of economy travel agencies from around the globe. Features information for domestic and world travel needs. <http://www.budgettravel.com/>

**Council Travel** - works especially with students and teachers, via airlines such as TWA, to offers discounts for educational programs when students or teachers travel in groups. Local offices around the country: just look them up in your yellow pages to find the one nearest you. <http://www.counciltravel.com>.

**Hostels.com**, <http://www.hostels.com>, and Hostelling International, <http://www.hiayh.org/> - if you don't find a good home stay program for you or your group, the next most economical and often fruitful learning experience comes by way of youth hostels. This web site tells what international hosting is, along with information about U.S. and international hostels. See also: <http://www.iyhf.org/>

**Travel with Kids: How to Find Discount Airfares on the Web**, <http://travelwithkids.about.com/travel/travelwithkids/library/misc/blfindairfares.htm> - an article that discusses five strategies for finding the best airfares. Includes links to many different fare-finder tools.

**Priceline.com** - name your price (within reason) for an airline ticket, and you can choose what airlines, airports, and how many transfers you are willing to make. The more you limit the options, the less likely your bid will be accepted. I often get tickets at half price by using Priceline. The catch is that once they accept your bid, you are stuck with the price and with tickets that are non-refundable and non-transferable. (You can also make bids for small groups traveling together.)

### For More Information...

For answers to other questions about service learning and student travel resources, or to find additional information about Puerto Rico or The Free School, we invite you to visit our Online Action Guides, at <http://www.great-ideas.org/guides.htm>, where you can easily link to the referenced web sites as well. Or, for a printed version of this Online Action Guide, call 1-800-639-4122.