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Geography doctoral student leads undergrads in Honduras

By Chris Zook

UNIVERSITY PARK, Pa. – While most Penn State students were enjoying their winter and spring breaks at home seeing old friends, Lewisburg native Thomas Sigler was working in Central America with Global Brigades, a nonprofit organization dedicated to student service learning and empowerment in the developing world.

Thomas, now a Ph.D. student in the Department of Geography at Penn State, became an active member in Global Brigades as a program director in Honduras from 2007 to 2008. There, he coordinated the group's business division and helped small rural businesses gain momentum and generate more income.

But that wasn't the plan all along, he says.

"When I decided to defer my Ph.D. from 2007-2008 to 2008-2009, I had no idea what I was getting myself into," says Thomas, who's originally from Lewisburg. "I'm so glad that I've had this opportunity – it really changed my outlook on life."

Perhaps that's why it didn't take Thomas long to get back to volunteer work. After returning to the United States in August 2008, he started work on his doctorate in geography. With one semester of his doctoral program under his belt, he headed back to Central America for the latter part of December and early January.

Thomas returned to Honduras with Global Brigades, but this time under the medical branch. He coordinated student groups that ran small, makeshift clinics in the rural and impoverished parts of the country.

Though equipped with only basic medical equipment and general medicine and pharmaceutical drugs, Thomas's clinic typically treated 300 people in a day. With all the other clinics dispatched around the country, Global Brigades was able to treat 7,000 patients in just two weeks.

"The people were very gracious," Thomas says. "We were really well-received."

As a token of the villagers' gratitude, Thomas says they'd often prepare food for the Global Brigade group and hang balloons and streamers.

"I've gotten some delicious local meals as 'thanks' for my help," he says.

Though Thomas was exposed to some of the "most dramatic poverty conditions in the hemisphere," he says, which was a trying and exhausting experience, he looks back on his time spent fondly.

"I genuinely enjoy being able to help people," Thomas says.

The trip also opened his eyes to some of the more wasteful habits of his own country, which has given him a "180 degree view of American culture," he says.

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For instance, in rural Honduras, all garbage is burned.

“Imagine if you had to burn all of your garbage near your house,” he says. “You’d probably buy things with a lot less packaging and you’d be tempted to make fewer impulse buys. Also, you’d probably reuse plastic bags and containers, as burning plastic goes right into your lungs.”

Despite the good-natured work of Global Brigades, Thomas admits to one downfall of the medical program. Medical Brigades is a “band-aid,” he says, because the program’s one-day clinics cannot resolve the chronic public health issues from which the populace in Honduras suffers.

“This is why we’re doing public health brigades, to try to address the problems like water contamination, which gives many people diarrhea and parasites,” he says.

In addition to the medical and business programs, Global Brigades has development opportunities in law, architecture, water, public health and several more. For more information, visit the organization’s Web site at www.globalbrigades.org.

For Global Brigades, The ultimate goal for the work in Honduras is to begin to see the farmers, who currently make \$3 or \$4 a day, turn a larger profit from their labor. Also, women in the area do not generate much, if any, additional income, prompting Global Brigades to seek means for women’s education and how to incorporate them into the work force.

Thomas’ experiences with Global Brigades have had a large impact on his life. He plans to do his dissertation in Panama in order to earn his doctorate and with his degree, he hopes to enter the academic world.

“Being a professor is a goal of mine,” he says.

However, more than a professorship, Thomas is determined to head back to Central America with Global Brigades throughout his career to expose students to some of the issues facing poor countries.

Last year, Global Brigades hosted more than 2,000 students in Central America participating in medical, business development, water, and environmental projects. GB works with groups from about 100 campuses across the U.S. and Canada.

He also hopes to find an answer to a very complicated question, one which has resulted from the culmination of his volunteer experiences.

“How can persistent poverty be solved?” he says.