

# St. Mary's HS brings back new world view from Mexico

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Staff Reporter

St. Mary's High School took a field trip south of the border this summer as three students and their Spanish teacher traveled to Puebla, Mexico to teach English. They ended up learning more than they ever expected.

Mary Kate Dvorak, a Spanish teacher at the Lancaster school, brought the kids to Enlaces Comunitarios Internacionales — meaning International Community Links. “It’s about building ties between people,” explained Dvorak. “They do a lot of social projects as well as environmental projects. We worked with them for a week and taught English at a summer camp, and also helped them with a few other construction projects around their community center.”

Enlaces Comunitarios Internacionales is a non-government organization that promotes community involvement through sustainable development in organic farming. It was founded by Arturo Ortega, a friend Dvorak's brother.

“It was a good experience for (the students) to be able to use their language skills,” Dvorak said. “In addition to that, the service element I think is really important and exposing the kids to different culture, different socio-economic level and learn that they can give back to the community, and a different community, make friends and share their talents with others and learn from other people.”

Even though she expected her students, and her brother's students at Lancaster High School to jump at the chance to visit a foreign country, only three volunteered, but they jumped fully in.

“I wanted to see the world. I wanted to explore and learn things, and I think the best way to learn things is through helping people and through getting out of your comfort zone and having new experiences,” explained Vincenza LaMagna, now a junior at St. Mary's. “Mexico was something completely out of the



COURTESY OF ST. MARY'S HIGH SCHOOL

Vincenza LaMagna (left) and Emma Ridolfi, from St. Mary's High School in Lancaster, lead a class for Mexican children at Enlaces Comunitarios Internacionales. St. Mary's spent a week in rural parts of Mexico this past summer as part of a service project.

norm for me. It's a very different place. The most humble and giving people I met in my life, the most faith-based people I met in my life, I met in Mexico.”

What amazed her was the sense of community, and not just to the locals. They treated the Lancaster crew as family. They shared what they had with each other, even though Puebla is a rural, poor area.

“They're not impoverished people.

They don't have riches material-wise or moneywise, but they're so rich in having family connections,” she said.

An average day involved playing with the kids aged 3 to 13, teaching the younger ones the English words for colors, while the older kids learned personality traits. High schools and colleges regularly visit the camp, each devising their own plan for education.

“When we first arrived, we

didn't have a clear idea of what was going on,” said Jim Lyons, Dvorak's brother, also a Spanish teacher. “The classes started coming and we were totally unprepared. My sister and I were reaching in our bag of tricks to keep them entertained. When we got home we decided, we got to have a plan. Then we powerplanned the whole night.”

The girls made flashcards and cut out paper figurines of the Three Little Pigs.

During the weeklong trip, that took place in July, the crew, which included Dvorak's two sons, spent five days with Ortega, then two nights staying at another host family.

“They got to eat with them and live with them for a few days. They were involved in the summer camp also, the families that we stayed with,” said Dvorak. “So, it was an eye opener. It was a very poor area of Mexico. It really affected the students and my kids a lot, because they hadn't experienced anything like that.”

The girls got a taste of what community really means when tragedy struck. While in San Jerónimo Tecuapipan, the townsfolk tried to collect funds for two boys, 16 and 19, badly hurt when a truck hit their bikes. A third victim died.

“They were both in really serious condition. The hospital situation there is really different. If you don't have money you go to a public hospital. Nobody has health insurance, especially in this small town,” Dvorak said.

She describes the family as living indigenous, simple lifestyles. Their father had died. Their mother supported the family by making tortillas. The boys had to drop out of school and get jobs to help out. They were on their way to work as apprentice masons when they were hit.

“They were one of the poorest families in a poor community anyway,” Dvorak said.

They went to the family's house to pray with them as a show of solidarity. The girls decided to start a

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COURTESY OF ST. MARY HIGH SCHOOL

Mary Kate Dvorak, Spanish teacher for St. Mary High School in Lancaster, leads a service trip to the rural area of Puebla, Mexico with three of her students, her brother and sons, (pictured from left) Allie Cole, Emma Ridolfi, Vincenza LaMagna, Jameson Dvorak, Mary Kate Dvorak, James Lyons and Donovan Dvorak.

## Mexico trip changed students

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GoFundMe page to help pay for expenses.

"It was really awesome how the girls took the reins," Dvorak said.

"People there don't pity themselves and they don't expect anything from you, but the gratitude that's

brought is just beautiful," said LaMagna.

Now, back in school in the United States, the girls find the experience changed them.

"I started caring a lot more about the environment. I bought metal straws. I made my parents buy the (canvas) Wegmans

bags so we don't use the plastic ones anymore. I try to focus on the little things," said Allie Cole.

Emma Ridolfi encourages other students to take any opportunity they have to visit a different city. "It opens up your entire world view and you see things in a bigger picture," she said.