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A Different Kind of Spring Break: US Air Force Academy Students to Visit Nicaragua

By Jennifer Elise Foerster

It's that time of year again. Spring Break. When I was 18, I was waiting for a bus in Tijuana with eight friends, a few guitars, and a backpack of beach-lounge supplies. My destination: Any Beach Town, South of the Border, and my memory of it: sunburn, a lost wallet, and other things I wouldn't write home about.

I am relieved to learn there exists a different (and more beneficial) way to spend one's Spring Break. This year, four student cadets from the United States Air Force Academy will be spending their Spring Break in Nicaragua. These students, led by InnerCHANGE WORKS Director, Janet Foerster, and Air Force Academy Professor and faculty escort, Sky Foerster, will be working with ICW's health promotion and computer literacy community development projects.

InnerCHANGE WORKS (ICW) is a U.S.-based non-profit organization that has been operating within Nicaragua for the last seven years. In January, ICW hosted a team of Computer Science doctoral research students from Colorado Technical University to visit Nicaragua to conduct trainings through ICW's Computer Project with community members in Managua and Tola.

This month, from March 22 to April 2, ICW will be leading a cultural immersion service-learning trip for the U.S. Air Force Academy. The trip is funded by the U.S. Air Force Academy as part of the Academy's effort to provide opportunities for cadets to engage with countries and cultures around the world.

For the four participating cadets, each majoring in different fields, from Space Operations to Biology, to Management and Political Science, this will be their first trip to Latin America. The U.S. Air Force Academy cadets will be working closely with students from the Universidad de Americas (UAM). By collaborating side-by-side on service projects, they will have the opportunity to exchange and discuss ideas on civic leadership and community development, while also hosting and enjoying a "feria" with local communities, complete with sack races, prizes, music, and food.

The cadets, along with UAM students, will be running health and sports fairs at the primary schools on the El Quetzal Estate Coffee Farm and the Selva Negra La Hammonia Coffee Farm in Matagalpa, for health clinics and libraries in Tola, and at the California School in Villa El Carmen. Health fair activities for youth and families will focus on dental hygiene, clean water, and sports, including Ultimate Frisbee tournaments and other games for children and youth.

Through organizing and hosting this unique Spring Break trip, ICW, in partnership with the U.S. Air Force Academy, hopes to provide Air Force Academy students with a deeper understanding of Nicaragua and its people, while building relationships and cross-cultural bridges among U.S. and Nicaraguan educational institutions and youth.

InnerCHANGE WORKS is a not-for-profit corporation incorporated in the State of Colorado, organized exclusively for charitable and educational purposes—including but not limited to developing and managing culturally congruent, community-based humanitarian development programs with a special focus on children and families, health, education, and workforce development—and is registered as a tax-exempt charitable organization under Section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code.

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ICW believes that each cultural exchange between our countries' youth and students narrows our international divide and fosters a more peaceful, just, and healthier future. While my beach bum adventures at 18 were all *in the name of* peace, it's this kind of Spring Break that can actually help *build* it.

For more information, and to participate in any of these upcoming health fairs or cultural exchange opportunities, please contact ICW Director Janet Foerster at janetjfoerster@gmail.com or visit www.innerchangeworks.org

Jennifer Foerster is a freelance writer and lives in San Francisco. InnerCHANGE WORKS, a U.S.-based 501(c)3 organization working in Nicaragua, is directed by its founder, Janet Foerster. For more information on InnerCHANGE WORKS and our community programs, please visit our website: www.innerchangeworks.org

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