

Students explore cultures, discover abilities rebuilding indigent communities

by Dina Epstein

Junior Ronit Ridberg lived in a church this summer. Senior Karen Silberg stayed in a school, and junior Karen Forseter slept in a dilapidated grocery store. All three went on a program run by Visions, a community service program in which student volunteers help to improve various communities. Junior Josh Young went on a similar program, run by the American Jewish Society for Service.

Silberg lived in the small town of Sabana Perdida in the Dominican Republic where her program group built an addition to the school. While Silberg felt "the work was physically demanding," she found great satisfaction in what she had done. "When I walked in the street, [the children's] faces lit up; I had an impact on their lives. By building and expanding their school, we allowed the kids a chance to get an education."

Silberg was very much a part of the town in which she lived. "We worked very closely with the Dominicans," Silberg said. "We lived in the Dominican neighborhood and we were in constant contact with Dominicans." She added, "I think we gave them a lot of reassurance that people care."

In the journal that she kept, Silberg noted the openness and hospitality of the local people. She wrote: "They have so little yet they opened their arms and their hearts to us and made us feel like this was our home."

But Silberg learned far more about their society than what is often found in books. She learned first-hand about how the Dominicans, living in abject conditions, make the most of what little they have. "People must deal with rationing electricity 15-20 hours a day and that means no water at those times either." The Dominicans "conserve everything. They took the nails out of a roof that was being torn down so that they could use them again."

But the Dominicans were not the only ones to benefit from the students' volunteer work. "Everyone in the group wants to make a conscious



photo courtesy Karen Silberg

Chino and Bienvida thank senior Karen Silberg who helped build an addition to the Sabana Perdida schoolhouse in the Dominican Republic.

effort to help those in need; we all became more responsible and conscientious," Silberg said. "Before I got there, I had no idea what my limitations would be...it's hard when you are living in such an impoverished community. It can be emotionally trying...I realized that I could handle [these obstacles] and thrive in them. Very little bothered me. I could handle everything."

Ridberg also enjoyed her experience on the Visions program. She worked on the British Island of Virgin Gorda where her group's main project was building a house for a local woman and her two sons. The woman's third son had died as a result of asthma a few months before, and she and her remaining children were homeless.

Ridberg's group also built a pavilion at an area playground and made a hiking trail across one of the islands. In addition, they did many odd jobs around the island, such as fixing plumbing and reinforcing structures.

The life-style on Virgin Gorda made a strong impression on Ridberg. "I was happy to experience a different culture," she said. "It was a friendly place. It is considered rude there to just go up to somebody and ask them for directions. You must first establish a conversation with them. Ask them about their day and their life. Then you can ask how to get somewhere."

While the area was poor, Ridberg felt that in some ways the austerity actually contributed to the lifestyle. "It's really interesting because...there weren't a lot of luxuries. Life is simple there."

Ridberg also grew to feel a part of the community she helped. "People hosted barbecues for us," she said. "We had friends and dances. We weren't just visiting. It was like we were friends and we were coming to help out."

For Ridberg, the summer experience she had was only the beginning. "I'm already looking forward to next summer. I'd like to do a program out of the country. I gained a sense of accomplishment and fulfillment that I did a *mitzvah*."

But Ridberg also felt she benefited personally by the experience. "I gained a greater sense of confidence. If so many think 'I can make a difference' and you get together with others, then you can."

While Silberg and Ridberg had very positive experiences on their programs, Forseter's program was not as enjoyable. She was based on an Indian reservation in Elmo, Montana where her group built a storage shed for the local medicine man and fixed some playgrounds in the area. The people "weren't really open, [they] didn't seem eager to have us there. If we wanted to talk to them, we really had to do it ourselves."



photo courtesy Ronit Ridberg

Junior Ronit Ridberg helps build a house in a poverty-stricken section of Virgin Gorda, a British Island. Ridberg felt that she benefited from experiencing a different culture.

However, Forseter did learn about the history of Native Americans who lived on the Flathead Reservation where she stayed. One member of the Kootenai tribe, Roy Big Crane, became a favorite of the students and was invited to eat dinner with the group on many occasions. He directed a movie about the reservation and its dam and taught volunteers a lot about the history of the place.

Forseter and her peers also attended an Indian Pow Wow, which she likes to a fair. There she and the others watched dance competitions and studied Native American culture.

Aside from learning about the cultures of the area in which she lived, Forseter also learned about herself. "I realized a lot about stereotyping," Forseter said. "A lot of people think that Native Americans walk around with headdresses. In fact, they walk around just like you and me. They are somewhat different in their culture,

and I learned that there was much to respect."

On a similar program, Young lived and worked in Tucson, Arizona. His group renovated a house for an older woman, Jessie, with whom Young became close. Jessie was "in her eighties and never got to see anyone except her daughter. She doesn't have many people to talk to," said Young. He also fixed up a foster child home and repaired playgrounds.

"It's interesting," said Young. "They were so friendly. They don't have many people to talk to, so they always wanted to talk to us."

Young's experience in an impoverished community enabled him to better appreciate all that he has. "It was different—the area that we lived in is filled with people who have everything," Young said. "You get to this area and see all these people without anything and you realize how much you have."