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Volunteer in the Dominican Republic

By Jessie Feller

The first thing I noticed when I stepped off the plane in Santo Domingo was the incredible noise. When visitors arrive in the Dominican Republic they are met by their entire extended family. Boom boxes play full blast and everyone dances and laughs and celebrates. At least that's what happened with us—a motley group of 20 teenage Americans heading off for three weeks of community service under the auspices of Visions, a 13-year-old nonprofit organization based in Newport, PA; www.visionsserviceadventures.com.

The Visions program was an excellent mix of work, play, and study. We worked at building homes or managing a daycare camp four hours every morning, then came back for lunch and went out to see the country.

We were in charge of daycare camp for very poor children in a building with four walls but no roof. I taught them hip-hop and they taught me merengue.

One of the big lessons I learned while I was in the DR is how little a person needs materially to be happy. Our group lived very simply—often without electricity and water—but in luxury compared to the way most people live in the DR. The people have an amazing spirit and love for life. In spite of the hardships, I never once heard anyone complain about their circumstances.

I would encourage everyone to experience a new and absolutely incredible culture and to challenge themselves by taking part in a community service program abroad.

JESSIE FELLER is a high school student at Marin Academy in San Rafael, CA. Her trip was supported by a grant from the Lumpkin Foundation.