

CSL MEXICAN ADVENTURE

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October 20, 2007



Upon our return from New Orleans in March, many boys wanted to know if the CSL Program was going to run a trip in the summer after Greenwood's graduation. So, given the overwhelming interest and a careful on-site investigation, the CSL Program led its very first Summer Service Learning Trip to Mexico from June 12th-25th, 2007 with seven Greenwood students: Alex Hurko, David Williams, Robbie Mosher, Mick Sheehan, Eric Gottlieb, Stephen Anderson; and Greenwood alumnus, Ben Krasny. The trip was led by Kate and Adam Jones, Sam Hamm and focused on visiting and working with three communities: Mexicali (northeastern border/desert region of Mexico); Tijuana, Mexico; and San Diego, California. We spent

two weeks in all three regions experiencing a healthy mix of community development, cultural immersion, fun tourist-based activities, and reflection.

The CSL Program was very fortunate to have made contact with Los Niños (founded in 1974 as a non-profit, bi-national organization that assists families living along the California/Mexico border to become more self-reliant) and established a partnership to help make this trip a reality. They operate and manage over a hundred trips a year to Mexico with schools and universities all over the country!

After an enthusiastic night in a Hartford area hotel, Gilberto Martinez, Los Niños' Program Manager, met us in the San Diego airport and helped us wrestle our baggage off the conveyor belt, stack it on a trolley, and push it towards our van waiting outside. Within half an hour, we crossed the Mexico/US border and entered Tijuana. As we drove deeper into Tijuana, many of the boys commented on the noticeable contrast between California and the urban environment of Tijuana. We stopped for lunch at a local taco stand, and everyone had the opportunity to practice Spanish! After lunch, we drove two and half hours east out of Tijuana through the desert and toward Mexicali, Mexico. It was a breathtaking journey showcasing the striking beauty of Baja California.



We spent seven days in desert beauty of Mexicali, Mexico. While in Mexicali we primarily assisted Los Niños and local community members in their Green-area projects. Green-area projects were created to assist communities (especially schools) in growing grass to reduce allergies, asthma, and provide a piece of land that everyone in the community can be proud of and enjoy playing on. Naturally, grass is in very high demand in Mexicali because of its desert topography and lack of efficient equipment to distribute water. Grass soccer fields are unheard of almost everywhere in Mexicali. During the first three-days we were in Mexicali (June 13-15th), we worked in the mornings with a local Kindergarten, Elementary School and Middle School in distributing dirt, breaking up hard ground with shovels, planting seeds and spreading manure!



During the afternoons in Mexicali on the days we volunteered, when it was too hot to be in the direct sun, our group visited a cultural museum and had a private tour; went to the local zoo; went to a US/Mexico border migrant house and services center; visited a technology museum; and with our passports in hand we experienced crossing the border on foot. We all stood in line, talked to the US Immigration Officer, and crossed over into the US town, Calexico. Many of the boys remarked how weird it was to be back in the States, and how Mexico is right there on the other side of the fence. After an hour of walking around in Calexico, we crossed back over into Mexico and the boys experienced how differently Mexico handles visitors. No questions, no need for a passport - in fact, no person at all permitting you to enter. Just a gate you push through.

During the evenings of everyday on our two-week trip we spent time in reflection, both individually working in journals (paper and video), and collectively talking about what we came across on that particular day. This was a very important time for the group because it was the one guaranteed time during the day when things slowed down and the constant overwhelm from the day took a break. Often during our group reflection time we would talk about the food that was graciously cooked at the schools during our work projects or the soccer games we played with the local kids or we'd have Spanish translation sessions or pass around the pictures that a school drew for our group as a thank-you or have discussions about immigration, ecology or politics. Our evening sessions and stories were endless! And once the local kids knew we were our group was staying, it wasn't long before we had some knocks on the door at night asking to come outside and hang out! Being in Mexico – both for service and fun – was a complete cultural exchange for our entire group and there simply wasn't enough time in the day to experience everything!



On Saturday (June 16th), our group took a day off from service-work and drove two and half hours south east to visit the Valley of the Giants – 2,000 year old, 40-60ft cacti. Unlike any place else on the planet, seeing these giants was a truly remarkable sight. After we left the Valley of the Giants, we drove to a beach (Gulf of California) on the outskirts of San Felipe. The water was a beautiful warm blue and we had the beach all to ourselves. After we left the beach, we drove to downtown San Felipe and did some tourist-style shopping. On the way home from San Felipe, we stopped at a very small Cucupa museum and gift shop. The boys had a chance to check out the museum and all the artifacts, and even buy some locally made jewelry.

On Monday (June 18th), we volunteered with the Beehive Harvesting Community! Ever since we built the ten beehives at Greenwood in May - the boys in our group had been so excited to hand deliver the hives to the community members and work with them to harvest honey. After both groups had the opportunity to put on the beesuits and go out in the desert, we all came back and learned - firsthand - how they harvest the honey. Each boy even had the chance to help harvest the honey by using a hot electric knife to cut the honey from the honeycomb. And when it was all done, we ate some honey directly off the honeycomb! After lunch, we presented the beehives we built, and transported all the way from Greenwood, to the Beehive Ladies. Their long-term goal is to have 600 hives - right now they have around 250. After we left the Beehive Ladies we drove to another community whose main livelihood is making and selling bricks and roofing tiles made out of clay. First, we helped them with the construction of a floating land bridge that would assist the community's kids in crossing the local river and attending school. Afterwards they demonstrated how they make roofing tiles out of clay, and they even let our group have a go at making a few!

On Tuesday (June 19th), we traveled back to Tijuana in the morning, and in the afternoon we drove to the US/Mexican border to check out the fence, but more specifically to check out the most western fence as it runs into the Pacific Ocean. The boys had fun going down to the fence and crossing a few feet into the US, all the while being watched very closely by the US Border Patrol only 200 feet away. Many of the boys commented how weird it was to be that close to the States - or even walk a few feet in the States as they slipped through the fence - but not be allowed to go 'home.' Questions were raised around, "Why this border, why here, why does it matter, who says so..."



On Wednesday (June 20th), we had our last day of service in Mexico at a local Elementary School where we worked with members of the community to make a cement foundation which included 20 bags of cement mixed with sand, gravel and water. We all learned firsthand what it means to mix cement without a cement mixer! In the afternoon, we went to a local orphanage and hung out with the kids for an hour - bringing ice cream and hugs! We played them in a game of soccer, chased them around in games of tag, and had a great time relaxing with them. Many of the boys remarked as we were leaving how they wished we could stay there for longer - even forfeiting their time in San Diego to stay with the kids at the orphanage for another day!

On Thursday (June 21st), we crossed back into the United States and spent the next three days in San Diego focused on re-accumulating to the United States, post-trip reflection and debriefing, and also having time to relax and have fun! In short, we watched movies, played on the playground, went to the beach, went to the San Diego Humane Society and had a tour, went to Balboa Park and saw an IMAX on Dinosaurs, went to a hands-on Science Museum, went to the San Diego Zoo for a full day, and went to a final dinner in downtown San Diego. Also, in keeping with our service-learning design, every evening we created the space for individual and group reflection time. It was certainly interesting to listen to the boys make meaning of their time in Mexico - especially in contrast to the comfortable and lush setting of San Diego. On Monday (June 25th) all the boys boarded their respective planes and off they went back to home.

Our trip to Mexico was immensely successful and has set the stage for Greenwood to expand their CSL Program into a larger Summer Program this coming summer of 2008. The CSL Program eagerly awaits the time that we can return to Mexico and continue working with Los Niños and the members of our extended Mexican family!