

# IMMERSION

STUDENTS TRAVEL TO ECUADOR AND THE DOMINICAN REPUBLIC THIS WINTER, TO BE OF SERVICE.

BY SARA COLABELLA '08, MA'11

When psychology major Isabel Mesquita '20 volunteered – for her third immersion trip – to travel to Quito, Ecuador, she was looking forward to experiencing a new culture.

But she did not expect to feel so comfortable with the people of Quito so quickly, “Being in an unfamiliar place can be daunting at first, but the community was so kind and welcoming that I felt at home within the first few days of arriving.”

For more than 20 years, Fairfield University has offered students the opportunity to participate in international and domestic immersion service trips. The goal is to help students understand an environment that is different from their own.

The trips are inspired by a desire to express *solidarity*, a core principle of Catholic teaching, and a Christian virtue focused on: social justice, the pursuit of equality, and the

value of human dignity. Through these immersion trips, students are engaged with international communities in need, and are able to connect their experiences and insights, to then inform the theories they explore back in the classroom.

“We focus on building relationships, recognizing we have no special insight into the challenges faced by the people we meet,” stated Kevin Molloy, campus minister for domestic and international immersion. “We have nothing more to offer than human relationship. In that, we also recognize that we are offered the grace of human relationship from the people we meet.”

“These trips allow students to leave behind social media, technology, comfort, and begin to build deeper relationships with their peers,” continued Molloy.

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**In Quito, students cleared a plot of land to build a house for a local family.**



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KEVIN MOLLOY, *Campus Minister*



Led by student leaders Seamus O'Brien '20 and Mesquita, the group of ten Fairfield students and two staff members, Molloy and Colleen Wilson '11, M.Ed., traveled to Quito in early January.

Located in the highlands of the Guayllabamba river basin on the eastern slope of Pichincha in the Andes Mountains, Mesquita described Quito as densely populated and “like living in the clouds,” since the city’s elevation is over 9,000 feet.

Fairfield students were housed with student volunteers from other Jesuit schools at The Working Boys’ Center, a family-centered development program geared towards providing education and skills for children and their families.

The students’ responsibilities included working in the Center’s carpentry workshop, shadowing teachers in an English class, helping with onsite projects, and clearing a plot of land to build a house for a local family.

Each night, the students gathered to reflect on their experiences during the day.

“We definitely made strong connections with everyone we met,” Mesquita said.

After Fairfield, Mesquita hopes to become a high school teacher, and the trip exposed her to hands-on experience.

During their downtime, students toured historic Quito, visiting landmarks including the Basílica del Voto Nacional, a Roman Catholic



church known for its gothic revival style. Additionally, the group ventured three hours outside the city to visit indigenous communities in Otavalo, and on the final day of the trip they traveled to the Equator.

A few thousand miles north of the Ecuador immersion trip, Fairfield students led by Elisa Castelli '19, Isabelle Seppa '20, and staff members Kathleen Byrnes and Jack Delaney, arrived at Mustard Seed Communities, a non-profit organization that provides residential care to children with disabilities, in Puerto Plata, Dominican Republic.

The group immediately took notice of the vibrant blue, green, and pink Mustard



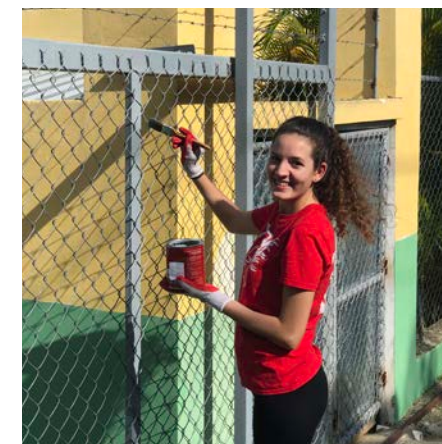
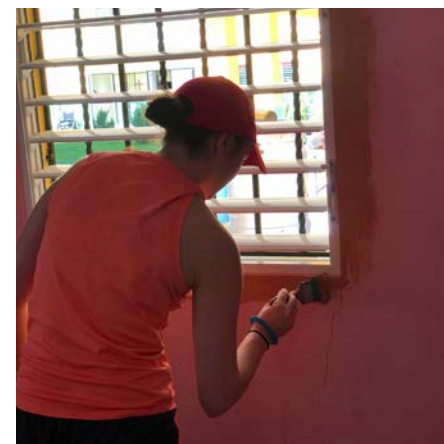
**TOP:** Located on the eastern slope of the Pichincha volcano, the capital city of Quito sits 9,350 ft. above sea level.

**ABOVE LEFT:** Student leaders Seamus O'Brien '20 and Isabel Mesquita '20 pose in different hemispheres at the Equator.

**ABOVE RIGHT:** In their downtime, students toured the sites of Quito including the sprawling Ofelia open air food market.

Seed buildings within the lush countryside landscape. Separating the community into two sections is a garden where volunteers grow mangos, avocados, apples, and other produce to feed the children who live at the Center.

During their time in Puerto Plata, the



**TOP LEFT:** Each morning the students painted the brightly colored buildings in the Dominican Republic.

**TOP RIGHT:** Elisa Castelli '19 paints one of the community fences.

**ABOVE:** Students who volunteered for the Dominican Republic immersion trip gather for a group photo.

students helped care for 48 children with severe disabilities – primarily children with cerebral palsy, microcephaly, and Down syndrome.

“The students had to think beyond what they knew to engage kids who were confined to wheelchairs and mostly non-verbal,” Byrnes said.

Each morning, the students gathered to paint the brightly colored buildings and weed the community garden. In the afternoon, they fed and played with the children, and assisted the nurses with daily physical therapy sessions.

“The most rewarding part was seeing the smiles on the children’s faces and hearing some of them laugh as we played with them,” stated Castelli. “We were able to bond with them to the level where we were able to bring them joy by spending time with them, and that in itself was reward enough.”

“Throughout the course of the week I watched our team grow more confident in interacting with the children and adults,” said Seppa. “As a leader, I was so proud of how my group learned to work with the people.”

## HUMANITARIAN ACTION MINOR CONTINUES TO GROW

INTRODUCED IN 2016 BY THE COLLEGE of Arts and Sciences, in collaboration with Fairfield’s five schools, the humanitarian action minor has continued to grow in popularity.

The minor was established in response to the increasing number, scope, and intensity of humanitarian emergencies. The 18-credit program complements various fields of study – from nursing to business – with concepts, theories, and skills to respond to humanitarian needs both domestically and internationally.

The program is closely connected to Fairfield’s chapter of the Jesuit Universities Humanitarian Action Network (JUHAN), which allows students to connect coursework with service learning and experiential learning opportunities.

Since its inception, students minor-ing in humanitarian action have already made an impact on human rights issues. In service learning courses, they assisted the non-profit organization Scholars at Risk in freeing two scholars – Mohammad Hossein Rafiee, PhD, a retired Iranian chemistry professor imprisoned in Tehran, and Professor Bekele Gerba, a foreign language professor at the University of Addis Ababa imprisoned in Ethiopia.

Students conducted research and prepared an advocacy report for each of the freed scholars, focusing on the cases’ backgrounds, geo-strategic relations, foreign policies, and domestic politics. The reports assisted Scholars at Risk in its work to highlight each case internationally.

For more information about the humanitarian action minor, visit [fairfield.edu/humanitarianaction](http://fairfield.edu/humanitarianaction).