

ODU nursing students feel rewarded by mission trip

By Christy Barritt
Correspondent

One of the goals at Old Dominion University is to expand international connections. Three nursing students at the school had a chance to do just that in El Salvador.

Channel Vialet, Caitlin Tukey and Cynthia Nielsen traveled to the Central American country last June as a part of United Methodist Volunteers in Missions. While on the trip, they traveled to three different locations to set up clinics and help locals with basic health concerns.

The week-long trip changed each of them.

"It was a good experience," said Nielsen, a 2007 Oscar Smith High graduate. "It's rewarding to go out there. You feel fortunate, but at the same time,



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Caitlin Tukey, left, of Chesapeake, Cynthia Nielsen of Chesapeake and Channel Vialet of Suffolk – all nursing students at ODU – volunteered for a missions trip to El Salvador that turned out to be an emotional experience.

your heart breaks for these people. You just want to help them."

"One thing I noticed in El Salvador was that ev-

erybody was happy," said Vialet, who graduated from Suffolk's Nansemond River High in 2007. There was no sadness or depres-

sion or suicide. None of that. Everyone was happy with what they had. I brought that back with me. Be happy with what you have. There's always someone who has it worse than you."

Tukey, a 2006 Great Bridge High graduate, said: "You definitely come back changed. You're more conscious of everything around you."

The trip was full of memorable experiences, including setting up a clinic where dogs and chickens roamed among the triage area, and trying to explain to locals how to use the tongue compressors.

One of the most touching moments came when they visited an elderly woman who was homebound, blind and suffered from spinal stenosis.

"I think all of us were

in tears by the end of it," said Tukey, 22. "It was really touching. There was no electricity or running water. The house was basically just mud and stone walls, and this woman was all alone. She was just so tiny and so frail but so grateful. It was really moving."

The three went on the trip at the invitation of their nursing advisor at ODU, Janice Hawkins.

"Nurses have a unique skill set to offer on a mission trip," said Hawkins, a member of Great Bridge UMC. "I hope this introduces them to the mission field and fosters a lifelong commitment to service. Nurses are expected to deliver culturally competent nursing care."

She said all three of the young women were an exceptional addition to the team.

"We really didn't know each other very well before the trip, and it's definitely not a vacation," Hawkins said.

"Once we were there, I really appreciated that they embraced every part of the trip"

All three ODU students will be graduating in May. Vialet enjoyed using her skills in other countries so much she went to Haiti on a mission trip over spring break. Nielsen will also be going to Haiti later this month with her church, Prince of Peace.

"I would encourage anyone to go on a trip like this," said Vialet. "It gets you out of your comfort zone and helps you to appreciate everything that you have."

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