

On April 13, 2014, after nearly a year of preparation, juniors Husna Afzal, Karolina Jaworowska, Guadalupe Santana, and Berenice Vara and seniors Taylor Silvestri and Dzenana Skenderovic headed to the Dominican Republic accompanied by Mr. Lichaj and myself for the school's first international trip in recent history. The purpose was to practice Spanish, work alongside Dominican students on environmental service projects, and learn about the culture and history of the Dominican Republic.



Taylor, Karolina, Berence, Lupe, Husna, and Dzenana at the first hospital built in the New World

We spent the first morning touring Santo Domingo and learning about the history of the island. It was really amazing to walk through where so much history was made. After the walking tour, we headed by bus to Jarabocoa, a town in the central mountain range of the Dominican Republic. Over the next few days, we did several service projects, made many new friends, and learned a lot about language, culture, history, and ourselves.

The first very thing we did was set some goals for the trip. Our goals were to practice Spanish, try all new foods, meet one new person every day, learn about new gardening practices for the school garden, and our hidden goal: to not kill Mark!



The girls and I with our goal poster

I spoke with the girls about meeting our goals.

Goal 1: Practice Spanish

Husna: I had the opportunity to practice my Spanish. We basically had no other option but to speak Spanish with the environmental school we were working with. I was also able to experience a new lifestyle and try new foods, which is my goal whenever I travel to another country.

Taylor: I am very happy to say that we were able to achieve this goal. We were forced to use our Spanish skills because many of the people we were around did not speak English at all. It was difficult at first, especially speaking because it was hard to remember the vocabulary, but after a couple days it became like second nature. We were the only group on the trip that was able to communicate with the students at the environmental school without a translator at all times.



Snack time at the Environmental School

Goal 2: Try all new foods

This was a difficult goal for some of us, myself included, because the food there is different than what we are used to. But we all tried everything and no one ever went hungry because they were always feeding us!

Taylor: We tried different foods that were native to their country and fresh fruit that was freshly picked from the school.



Sancocho dinner at the Environmental School



Farewell pizza dinner in Jarabacoa



Happy Birthday Taylor!



The full travel group with Hector and the Brigada Verde from Jarabacoa

Goal 3: Meet one new person every day.

We had the opportunity to meet many new people. We worked with students from the environmental school and the community, and traveled with students from North Carolina, South Carolina, and Maryland.

Husna: I was surrounded by amazing people that made this trip a life changing experience for me.



The full travel group with the environmental students



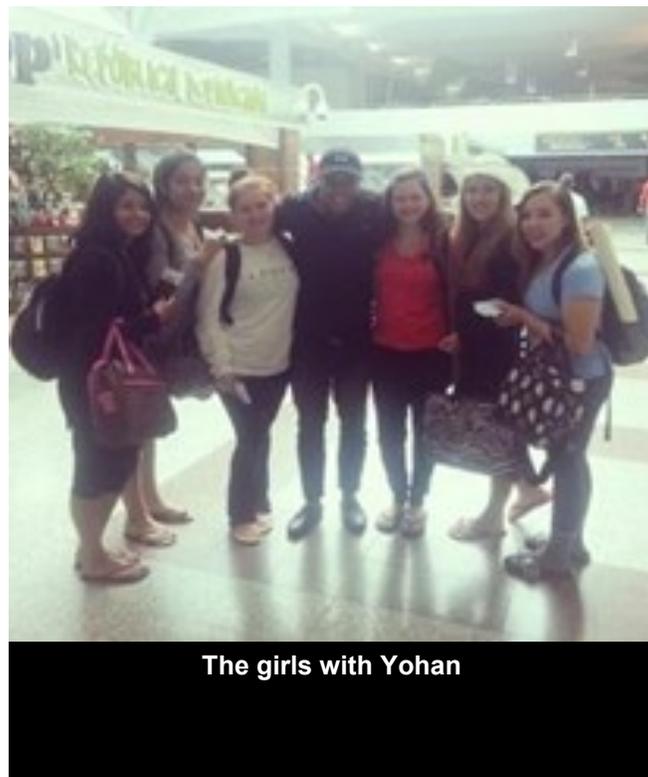
Volleyball with the environmental school students

Lupe: My favorite part was getting to know new people of the Dominican.

Our tour leader, Hector, the bus driver, Yohan, and our security escort, Miguel, were among our favorites.



Our group with Hector



The girls with Yohan



The girls with Miguel

Goal 4: Gardening Practices to bring home



Staining a bench

Dzenana: Some of the activities we did consisted of painting trash cans to place in the community, pulling out invasive species, painting benches to protect them from the weather, and working in the school's nursery.

Taylor: We also went on different hikes and learned about all the different plants and their uses that are all around us. The lesson of the week was about sustainable development. We had group meetings every night where we discussed related issues to sustainable development and how we can improve the environment around us.



Staining a bridge



Group presentation about sustainable development



Weeding at the environmental school



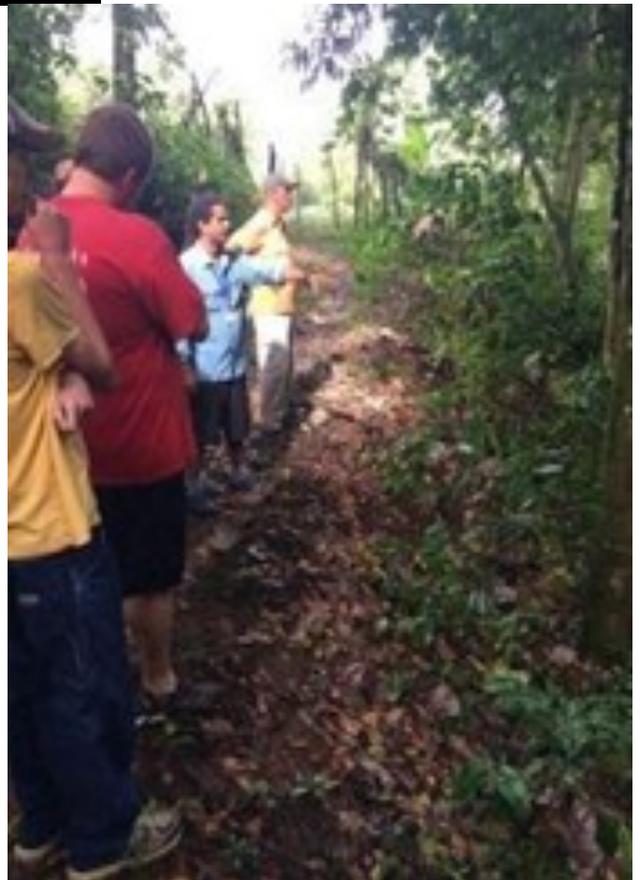
group presentation about water sheds with the Brigada Verde



Painting garbage cans



Working in the nursery



Hector and Elvis, professor at the environmental school, leading a hike.

It wasn't all work though. We were invited to the school's pre-spring break dance, went on a waterfall hike, and visited a tiny island off the northern coast of the Dominican.



Dance demonstration



learning to dance Merengüe



At the Salto de Jimenoa waterfall



On the beach

I also asked the girls for the reflections after we returned from our week in the Dominican.

What was the most difficult part of the trip?

Husna: To be honest, it was very difficult at first to get over the fact that there was no wi-fi which meant, no snapchat, Facebook, Instagram, etc. but all of us eventually got used to it, and when we did have wi-fi access, we didn't really care anymore.

Taylor: We were placed completely outside of our comfort zone, not just being with unfamiliar people, but we were also faced with the challenge of being placed somewhere that spoke a different language. Another difficulty we faced in the beginning was adapting to a different culture and way of living. In the United States, we have the benefit of always having hot water to shower with and having clean tap water and constant use of technology. Throughout this trip I realized that all those things are not that important. It was hard in the beginning to be without the internet and not being able to use my cellphone but within a short period of time, I was able to find other things to do that took my mind away from it all. It was a big change for us but we were able to adapt pretty quickly and it open our eyes to the over use and how much we take small things for granted where we live.

What did you learn?

Lupe: I learned that you should always take care of the resources that we have because there could come a point where the things we have, we will no longer have them.

Berenice: I learned that invasive species are things that we have to be careful of because they can take over the environment and it's important to keep our environment balanced.

Taylor: We were able to learn all about the new culture and experience living in a foreign country for a week.

Husna: I learned a lot on this trip, not only did I gain a lot of educational knowledge about my environment, I learned new techniques for our school garden, I learned new phrases in Spanish that I didn't previously know about. I learned to appreciate what we already have, and how many resources can be limited in other foreign countries compared to America. I also learned to break my picky-eating habits and try new things.

Dzenana: This trip helped open my eyes to the things I have and think twice when I want to buy something. The lessons that were learned on this trip will be carried with me forever.

What is the best memory you would share?

Taylor: We were able to accomplish all the jobs that we were given on the campus. An instructor told us that we were the only group who finished everything.

Lupe: Best memory would be the day we went dancing with the students of the environmental school. The students were great dancers!

Berenice: I agree. There was so much dancing and fun!

Husna: Yeah, it was our last day working with the environmental school so the students organized a dance and wanted to teach us three different types of dances: bachata, merengue, and salsa, all of which were somewhat different because of the Dominican culture. It was so much fun dancing with them, dressing up, listening to amazing music, and being with the people you are very close with. It was an unforgettable night!

What would you encourage people here to do based on what you learned there?

Lupe: I would encourage people to use less wi-fi and try to do things that do not involve technology.

Husna: I would encourage people to contribute more to their environment and school garden and to be more aware of the problems that can arise in our surroundings. Also, I would encourage people to try living without their phones and appreciate what we are given and reflect on that as well as trying new things from different cultures to get a different perspective of things.

Berenice: Something that I can encourage kids to do here is to take care of your environment because the resources that our environment gives us will not always be there so we have to take care of it.

As you can hopefully tell, we had an **AMAZING** experience. I could not have been more proud of my six girls. They really stepped up as leaders and friends. They embraced each challenge with a smile and positivity and overcame every obstacle that arose with grace and humor.

Thank you so much to all those who helped make this possible. We appreciate the support we received from the LSC, especially Mr. Swanson, Mr. Quiles, and Ms. Garcia, Chester Musiala and the Alumni Association, the staff here at Steinmetz and our friends and family. We could not have done this without you. And a super huge thank you to Mark Lichaj, Hector, Yohan, and Miguel for keeping us safe, teaching us, helping us, and making us laugh. "No minutes!"

