

‘Honored and Grateful’ Palisades Teen Teaches Art in Nicaragua

By SIERRA SHAFER
Staff Writer

Home to some of the most majestic terrain in Central America, Nicaragua rises from coastal plains to volcanic summits, dotted with mountain lakes and densely populated colonial cities. The culture is rich with poetry, music and art – but the extreme poverty of the nation has left a majority of young students without the resources to experience the arts.

Fifteen-year-old Palisadian **Ethan Altshuler** spent Thanksgiving working to change that. Lugging with him 70 pounds of donated art supplies, Altshuler made the trip from his home in the **Highlands** to Managua, Nicaragua, where he taught art classes to the bright-eyed students of El Coyol, a local school.

A two-hour van ride brought him, his parents, **Linda Sherman** and **David Altshuler**, and a family friend to the luxurious new Mukul Resort. The ecologically friendly development on the Emerald Coast helps build the fragile economies within local communities by providing some of the best working wages in the region.

Inspired by the socioeconomic spirit of the resort’s founder, Carlos Pellas, Altshuler left the luxury of the resort to visit a local family named Ruiz. There he experienced first hand the difficult living conditions among the second poorest nation in the hemisphere.

“There was no running water in the house, and they had to walk down a hill to get water from a well in their front yard. I helped pump water into a bucket,” he said. “I learned that in many parts of this country, the water is not safe and that the people of Mukul provide filters which make the water safe to drink.”

The Ruiz family, like many Nicaraguans, uses an outdoor shower and port-a-potty bathroom, made of wooden beams and metal walls. They wash their dishes by hand and cook over an open fire.

“I found out that before this family had electricity, which was 10 years ago, they had to use candles for light,” Altshuler said. “I also realized that the family had no computers or any form of

technology, and that they’re happy. The people in Nicaragua don’t need things to be happy. Not having technology was very intense. I had to get used to it, but surprisingly I wasn’t bored. I was too busy.”

Busy spending Thanksgiving morning fishing black tuna.

Busy riding bikes.

Busy exploring the jungle spotting howler monkeys.

Busy watching baby sea turtles get released into the ocean.

From the Ruiz home, Altshuler walked to his temporary classroom at El Coyol, stopping along the way to buy a two-foot long papaya for 18 cents.

El Coyol educates students from kindergarten through twelfth grade – all before noon, when the heat of the day makes the non air-conditioned classroom too hot to use. Among free-roaming chickens, pigs and dogs, Altshuler got to work in the outdoor classroom.

It was a moment of firsts for both teacher and students.

“Before I began my art lesson, I found out that these kids have never had an art lesson before. This was the first time they had ever held a paintbrush,” Altshuler said. “And I had never taught a class before in my life. I felt a little bit nervous at first teaching art to students at a school in a foreign country, but it was overall exciting.”

Speaking mostly in English and partial Spanish, Ethan and his translator guided the students through step-by-step instructions for drawing self-portraits and – Altshuler’s favorite – Minions and Gru from the movie *Despicable Me*.

“Art is a way for me to express my emotions and my talents. I feel awesome when I am doing art, and I am so grateful for this opportunity,” he said. “It was surprising to know these kids had never been taught. I am so honored and grateful that I was able to share this experience with them.”

Altshuler’s mom said she hopes her family can return to Nicaragua for another art lesson, but her son isn’t so sure. That’s only because he has his sights set on Cambodia as his next classroom.

“If Ethan had never picked up a paintbrush, he might not have learned



Palisadian Ethan Altshuler traveled to Managua, Nicaragua to teach art to local children, bringing with him 70 pounds of donated art supplies. Photo: Linda Sherman



Students at El Coyol show off the art projects they created in Ethan Altshuler’s class. Photo: Linda Sherman

to express himself in that way, and we might not have known he was an artist,” Sherman said. “We want these kids to have the chance to make the same discovery.”

At home in Pacific Palisades, Altshuler sells his art on his website, do-

nating a portion of his profits to his school, **Village Glen School**, and local charities.

“I’m trying to make Los Angeles a better place through art,” he said. “It has that power. Just think what it can do.”

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