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Section: NEIGHBORS

Page: B3

29 students return home from Latin America service projects

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Local teenagers joined Amigos de las Américas

Stephen Ott helped open a 200-book library in a community of about 4,000 in Honduras.

Christopher Stern built a bus stop for residents living in a Santiago, Panama, suburb.

Soleil Schwabe taught English and dance to children in Coclé, Panama.

Ott, Stern and Schwabe were among the 29 local teenagers who traveled to Latin American countries this past summer as part of the Amigos de las Américas, or Amigos, program.

Students from Green Fields County Day School, St. Gregory College Preparatory School, Salpointe Catholic High School and Sabino, Tucson High Magnet, Catalina Foothills, Sahuaro, Canyon del Oro and University high schools took part in one of the service trips offered by Amigos.

Students spent five to eight weeks in either Costa Rica, the Dominican Republic, Honduras, Mexico, Nicaragua, Panama or Paraguay.

"It's important to be able to understand how the majority of the world lives," said Ott, a senior at Green Fields. "This was a good opportunity to do that."

Tucson's chapter of Amigos, an international organization that gives student volunteers the opportunity to travel to a Latin American country and complete service projects, is accepting applications for the 2009 program.

An informational meeting for interested students and their families will be held at 7 p.m. Monday in the Every Voice in Action building, 2851 N. Country Club Road.

Applications are due Oct. 5.

Volunteers, who must be at least 16 and have completed their sophomore year of high school, live with host families while completing various service projects related to public health, education and community development.

Participants also are required to have completed at least two years of Spanish or Portuguese or have some fluency in one of the two languages.

In addition to raising funds to open up a community library in a UNICEF office in Chinacla, Honduras, Ott taught health education to students. Topics varied from basic hygiene to teen pregnancy and AIDS, he said.

Before Ott, 17, and the other volunteers set off for their destinations, they completed five months of training.

Mason Perino is a former student volunteer and now works as a training director for the Tucson chapter.

He was a project director in the Dominican Republic this past summer.

"The rewards are limitless," the 24-year-old Perino said. "It's a very challenging program in terms of what it demands of you as a young leader."

His father Daniel Perino also volunteered in the 1970s.

The health and safety of students is a top priority for the organization, Perino said. The training students receive is thorough, he said.

Training topics include problem solving and program planning, and Latin American geography, history and politics.

Part of the training also requires students to raise money to cover most of the program's fees.

Families should expect to pay almost \$1,500 in family fees and students must raise an additional \$4,500 to cover the cost of the 2009 program.

But the return for the teenage participants is priceless.

"Ultimately, what I found is that regardless of whatever I put into the project and regardless of whatever I left there, the community was ultimately the party that gave me the most," Ott said. "They gave me much more than I could possibly have ever given them."

Stern, of Salpointe High, who was in Cañazas Arriba, Panama, said the residents were happy with the new bus stop he helped build and the youth there now have a new sense of activism because of his work. But he still believes he walked away with much more than he gave to the residents.

"People feel guilty because we are getting so much more out of it than we put into it," he said.

Stern, 17, has done the program for two summers now. "I learned a lot. I got a strong sense of independence from this," he said.

Catalina Foothills senior Schwabe, who taught dance and English, also built a new sidewalk for residents of Coclé, Panama. Schwabe, 18, agreed the service projects are just a small part of the experience.

"I learned to sit and listen to the rain and not get stressed out about things," she said. "It was a very relaxed culture."

For more information, go online to www.amigostucson.org

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