

# In their Own

## First Coast Volleyball Players Go South of the Border

BY NEASE PANTHER, TAYLOR PERMENTER

On June 12, 2008, fifteen high school and middle school volleyball players boarded a plane to Managua, Nicaragua. We hardly knew each other and were totally unaware of the experience we were about to have. The trip was through Bring IT USA Promotions (a Volleyball travel service) and led by owner, Tim Kelly, a former All American Volleyball player for UCLA, and CJ Sherman, my high school coach.

Once we arrived, we hopped on a school bus and headed to the local gym to play against the Nicaraguan Senior and Junior National teams. As we walked into the building, it was obvious that this trip was going to be more about simply playing the sport of volleyball. The gym was dimly lit and dusty, with cement floors and no air conditioning.

It's amazing how different it was; especially the fact that none of us had ever truly realized how much we have in the United States. The cool air conditioning and slick wood floors, as well as access to ice cold water fountains and such nice equipment, are luxuries we all had taken for granted. That night began the 10 day journey through the Central American country that sparked a new awareness in each of us.

The next day, we headed to Finca Java, an organic coffee farm near Jinotepe. That night, we went to the local school to play and teach volleyball to the children. It started out as a game, just playing against a team of boys that the school had got together to play us. But, after a while, we broke off and started doing different activities; teaching the younger kids how to play, kicking

Planting trees at Finca Java



Group shot with orphans at Jinotepe

the balls around, having conversations with kids who didn't want to play. A couple of us even joined a basketball game that some of the older boys had started.

Whether it was talking about volleyball techniques, or the astonishing fact- to the kids who live there- that some of us are sixteen years old and six feet tall, every one lent a hand in speaking Spanish. The night was truly a great experience; it taught us that, even with a language barrier, people can still communicate and really have fun together.

The next morning we were awakened by the loud crow of a couple of roosters. Later on, we went on a hike, rode horses, and played baseball and colored with some of the kids who lived nearby while their parents had a community meeting. We also enjoyed our refreshingly freezing showers- accompanied by a bug here and there- and our delicious, home-cooked meals. All of this made everyone realize that the days spent by people in Nicaragua are purer and simpler and unpoisoned by the stress and mayhem of most modern societies.

About the author:  
Taylor Permenter is a Junior IB student at A. D. Nease High School in Ponte Vedra, FL. She carries a 4.3 GPA. Taylor is in National Honor Society, a member of the Photography Club, National Art Honor Society, BETA Club and Volunteers with Relay For Life and DIG PINK. Taylor plays Middle Blocker for the Panthers and also plays club volleyball for Jacksonville Juniors 16N team. This was Taylor's first international tour.



Group in Finca Java

After those two days, we ventured back to Managua where we played a couple more matches, which we all did well in, and then drove to San Juan del Sur, an absolutely beautiful town located on the coast of the Pacific Ocean. The place was filled with incredible experiences for every one of us. One of these was the opportunity to work on an "Earth Ship" construction site, building a solar home out of recycled and natural material. This was neat because we were working on the actual site, pounding dirt into old tires, sawing wood, and twisting wire to form the frame of a room. It was tough work, but showed us how much effort people actually have to put into the job. [Some of the other kids on the tour visited schools where they played with the kids and taught them some English words and songs and about not littering and other little life lessons.]

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The rest of our stay in San Juan del Sur included zip-lining through the rainforest, visiting the gorgeous beach, surfing, and simply enjoying the serenity. On our last night there, we played a volleyball match and then went out to dinner and ice cream with the team. It was awesome to speak with the girls in a fairly unfamiliar language and just learn about their lives.

Leaving San Juan del Sur was not something any of us looked forward to, but it definitely ended up being worth it. When we left, we drove to an orphanage in Jinotepe. As soon as we unloaded from the bus, a couple of kids ran up and hugged some of the girls. And that's when I knew that this day was going to be unforgettable. All of the kids were so adorable; I don't know how we ever left. At one point, someone took the huge bag of craft supplies that we had collected and set it on the floor of a craft room, and in less than five minutes, it was swarmed by little children and dispersed around the room. They were so ecstatic. Beads were soon spread all over the tables and happy faces were working hard on necklaces and bracelets. Each of us made a couple little friends and with them, we did puzzles, colored, played games, chased each other around the yard, and had insane amounts of fun. I have never seen so many smiles in my life.

It's just incredible how much these kids loved this one day that we came and spent with them. It was so upsetting to drive away; all of us had tears in our eyes, imprints on our hearts, and were touched in so many ways. That night, we stayed at the "base



Taylor and teammates



Taylor at orphanage



Group with the Nicaragua Youth team

camp" for volunteers and the next morning, our trip continued on to the next stop, Granada.

In Granada, we went on a boat to "Monkey Island", shopped in the market, and even climbed part of an active volcano. The trip as a whole was so much fun; every match we played and every place we visited was truly unique and unforgettable. A piece of my heart was left in Nicaragua and I am positive that I am not the only one who intends on returning soon.

So, yes, we did go to Nicaragua to play volleyball. We played well and even ended up beating the Senior National team. But, it was so much more. Such strong bonds were made amongst teammates; bonds that don't just happen by passing a ball back in forth in a gym or chatting over the phone. We were there for each other to observe a way of life so unlike our own and witness the way it changed the way we think and feel. Peoples' eyes were truly opened. The true beauty of the world revealed itself and each and every one of us was touched by it.

— Taylor Permenter