

Scholar Spotlight

Monique Grannum, Boston Scholar Class of 2008, came back last in August from a month long trip to Panama and Costa Rica with the summer abroad program International Doorways. Monique found International Doorways through Boston Scholars after asking BSP staff for help. She says she's always loved doing community service and never had the chance to go outside the Country by herself, so she really wanted to experience a new culture on a trip like the ones offered through International Doorways. Right before Monique left for Panama she suddenly came to doubt her decision to go in the first place.



Monique Grannum (Loomis Chaffee '08) takes a moment from her community service in Panama to learn more about the culture from a young volunteer.

"My mind was filled with questions and reservations about the trip. I was thinking 'Am I going to like the food?' 'Will the group be weird?' and most of all, 'How am I going to communicate with people when I don't speak any Spanish?'" Monique is a rising senior at the Loomis Chaffee School in Connecticut, where she has been taking Latin for three years. She speaks no Spanish; and yet had the nerve to travel to the remote jungles of Panama where only Spanish and native dialects are spoken. Her fears about traveling were washed away the moment she met her group and leaders in the airport in Miami. Her group had six students and two leaders, each from totally different places in North America. Monique says the moment she saw everyone she would be traveling with she suddenly stopped worrying and second-guessing and started getting excited about what this experience was going to be like.

The trip started as the group flew in a tiny plane to Costa Rica, where they spent a few days hiking in the mountains. From there the group drove to Panama, to the village of Chiriqui, where they visited coffee and strawberry plantations and went, despite Monique's fear of

heights, on a Canopy Tour—a zip line that takes you on a harness, speeding through the jungle. Next the group went to Gamboa, a village built solely for the workers of the Panama Canal during the late 19th century. While in Gamboa they stayed at a research center, went hiking and visited Panama City.

Next the group took a boat to the village of Embrera, population approximately 100, where they stayed for ten nights; each set of two students stayed with a different host family. Although it is only a 20-minute drive from Panama City, Embrera is as different from the city as possible. Deep in the jungle, surrounded by lush greenery and beautiful flowers, the group stayed in huts made from palm leaves and bamboo, bathed in the waterfalls nearby, and had no electricity or running water. Monique stayed with a family of five, in a two-room hut, sleeping in a sleeping bag on the floor. For ten days she could barely communicate with the people she was living with: they spoke no English and she and the other American girl with her spoke little or no Spanish. But they managed to get by, and even forged strong bonds despite the language barriers.



Boston Scholar Monique Grannum (Loomis Chaffee '08) is seen here (with white bandana) performing community service while in Panama on her travel opportunity BSP identified.

While in Embrera the group dug a giant ten-foot hole in the heavy clay earth for a toilet for the village and taught English to the adults of the village. These days in Embrera were Monique's favorite part of the trip because they gave her the opportunity to learn about Panamanian culture and interact with the native people. The group learned how to cook and prepare native foods, they had bonfires and native dancing at night, and overall learned to appreciate the intensity with which the villagers live their lives day to day.

The group left the village for the Cloud Forest in the mountains where they painted a school in the village of Duran. Next they went to Bocas del Toro, a group of islands off the Caribbean coast of Panama. There they went shopping at the street market, swam at the beach and went on a dolphin watch. The group finished the trip by returning to Costa Rica for the last two days where they went shopping white water rafting.

Monique says that the trip was incredible. "I did things on the trip I never thought I would do or even thought of doing," she says. There were parts that were really challenging for her, but she says that now that it's all over she's really glad she can say she did actually do it all. The community service that the group did was hard work and she says they all had to be really dedicated to keep going at times. She says that the trip has given her a real appreciation for how much work the natives have to do every day. Monique recommends going on a program like hers, especially, she says, "for someone who doesn't usually like to push themselves beyond their comfort zone. You have to do what makes you uncomfortable. You just have to do it. Even if parts are scary, you just have to push through them." Monique says that the trip was a great experience because it helped her to understand a totally different culture—something that she believes to be extremely important. "I believe learning about different cultures helps open people's minds and makes them capable of learning how to understand people who are different from them. Many people I know do not get to experience other culture and it prevents them from being able to understand why another person may talk, walk, dress, or act a certain way." This trip opened her eyes to some of these differences and she hopes that other Boston Scholars will have the opportunity to experience the same kind of things.