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Local students volunteer for summer projects in Latin America

By John T. Miller



Local participants of Amigos de las Americas during training at Briones in Lafayette. Photo provided

The East Bay Chapter of Amigos de las Americas held its annual graduation last Saturday at Newt Hollow in Briones Park. Included in the group were 11 students from Lamorinda high schools.

Amigos de las Americas is a nationwide program that sends volunteers to Latin America where they work with local citizens on beneficial community projects. Volunteers spend anywhere from four to eight weeks in their host country.

Local participants include Maya Supran, Sierra Barnes, Danielle Kelly, Peter Lee and Yichao Ma from Miramonte; Margaret Balfrey, Elizabeth Anderson, and Penny Hopkin from Campolindo; and Daniel Mone, Isabella Gonzalez and Ben Fromer from Acalanes.

They have received assignments in Chimborazo, a province located in the Andes Mountains of Ecuador; Cuenca, in the highlands of Ecuador; Cocle, a province of central Panama on the nation's southern coast; and Pérez Zeledón in Costa Rica.

Mone, a sophomore from Acalanes, described his proposed project in Cuenca: "For the first four weeks we'll be in Cuenca [a city of about 300,000] helping with agricultural sustainability, community gardens and food drives, and the other half of the time in the rural mountain areas assisting with their agricultural needs."

Lucy Schaefer, the East Bay Chapter Training Director, says, "The Lamorinda kids were really an impressive group. They showed a genuine excitement in participating in the Amigos program and are up to the task of gaining new perspectives and becoming more comfortable in foreign situations, which will be much different from their previous sheltered world."

Schaefer, who graduated earlier this month from UC Berkeley with a double major in Spanish and International Relations, did stints in Panama and Costa Rica while a high school student in Chicago, then became a project supervisor in the Nicaragua northern highlands in 2016 while a freshman at Cal.

Now, as director of the East Bay Chapter, she sees the mission of Amigos to encourage sustainable development and involvement of the community in the projects, while also providing a cultural immersion for the participants. "Most of the benefit from the volunteers' experience will be for themselves," she says. She also noted that many lifelong friendships result from their experiences in the field.

Fromer, a junior, learned about the program through his Spanish class at Acalanes. He signed up for much the same reason as many others: "I saw an opportunity to learn about the world and see communities outside of our little bubble, and a chance to gain experience for college while also improving my Spanish."

At the ceremony in Newt Hollow, each of the volunteers received a cot that will travel with them, a plane ticket to their destination, and an Amigos polo shirt. Depending on the length of their assignment, they will leave anywhere from mid-June to mid-July.

Balfrey, a junior at Campolindo will be going to Panama. She is worried about leaving her family for so long, yet says, "I am so excited for what the summer will bring and I think it will be very good for me as a person to grow."

In order to prepare for their summer projects, the volunteers went through intensive training sessions. But first they participated in the annual Amigos fundraiser, selling grapefruit, coffee, and poinsettias. Each volunteer was asked to sell \$950 worth of product.

The volunteers met in Marin County for their first overnighter in early February, learning about community-based initiatives and understanding multicultural and diversity issues.

In March, a daylong session covered health and safety training. Three health care workers, including Barb Wille, Jacqui Richter and Dr. Andy Sorenson, volunteered their time with various stations, such as necessary protocols, recognizing symptoms, and water purification.

Another session in April was devoted to teaching the volunteers to plan and organize activities - called Campamentos - for the children in their communities.

A final Briones overnight retreat in May completed the volunteers' training, cementing the bonding of the participants. Both Fromer and Balfrey said that the favorite part of their training was meeting and getting to know people from so many parts of the Bay Area.

Schaefer told the volunteers, "You'll have to deal with cultural adjustment, homesickness, and a cultural readjustment when you return. But you'll be heavily influenced by the experience and become more self aware."

For the local 11 high school students, the other members of the East Bay Chapter, and the hundreds of volunteers nationwide, we wish them a "Buen viaje!" for the summer, an enlightened experience, and a widened world view when they return.

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