

Student spends summer in service

by: Suzanne Briggs, NewsNet Staff Writer - 29 Apr 2003

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When winter semester ends, most BYU students pack up their stuff and go home to work. However, BYU senior Billy Betz has different plans.

Betz, 23, a business management major from Logan, is not only the captain of BYU's swim team, but he also creates his own adventures to help the less fortunate in the world.

During the last two summers, Betz, with no medical training, has gone down to El Salvador to work in medical clinics to help the people there in any way he can and is planning his third trip for this summer.

"I had always wanted to go do something like this because I would see people and they would tell me these amazing stories," Betz said. "I also would always watch those cheesy commercials about saving the children and I wanted to go do that."

The first summer Betz went to El Salvador, he went with an organized group, Help International.

During that trip, the group did micro crediting, giving out small loans to people who wanted to start a company.

Betz became bored with the micro crediting and began to search for more ways he could help the people. That is when he found the medical clinic.

"There was only one doctor, and the nurses weren't very qualified, so I helped them out," Betz said. "I thought I wanted to be a doctor but after that experience I decided there are other ways to help people."

Betz then had the opportunity to do what he had seen on television to really assist the people. He vaccinated children, sutured wounds and even delivered two babies.

Betz's dad, Phil, said his son has always been a person concerned with other people.

"He is an eminent peacemaker and is tremendous at going up to people and wanting them to be happy," Phil said.

Although Betz's first trip to El Salvador was not what he had expected, he recognized the El Salvadorian's needs and wanted to return the following year to bring those things back to them.

"They didn't have any medical supplies," he said. "They had one bedsheet for each day and would turn it over at lunch time."

The second year, Betz received an offer from a guy in El Salvador who had medical supplies that he wanted Betz to bring down with him.

Betz and his best friend, Brent Skinner, bought a 1985 Chevy van for \$1,000 for the drive south loaded with the equipment. However, the van would not pass inspection because it had so many problems, he said.

"There were 20 things wrong with the van and so I tried to fix it," Betz said. "I took out the three benches in the back and saw these pipes and so I hacked them off but that was a stupid idea because they were the antifreeze pipes."

He corked the pipes and he took the van back to the inspection office. When the inspector opened the back door the corks flew off and antifreeze went flying everywhere.

"She didn't pass the inspection and so we could only get temporary registration for the van," he said.

Betz and his friend then loaded up the van with the X-ray machines, mammograms and respirators and left Provo, heading south.

The van broke down three times before they had even left the states and every mechanic that looked at their van told them they would never make it to El Salvador.

"We were looking for an adventure and we knew we would make it somehow," he said.

Day five into the trip they finally crossed over the border into Mexico. They had been driving for five hours in Mexico when they started going up a hill and the van quit.

"It totally died and when we inspected it the axles were glowing red and we thought this couldn't be good," Betz said.

They said a prayer and the van started up again and they were able to make it over the hill. Betz and Skinner drove for 30 hours straight in a rainstorm because they were afraid if they stopped, the van would never start up again.

They drove at night for the rest of the trip because the van would constantly overheat in the hot summer temperatures.

Betz finally made it to Guatemala, but without the right papers, they could not get across the border into El Salvador. They ended up spending the night in Guatemala. The next day, after driving all day, they arrived at the capital in El Salvador, six days after leaving Provo.

Betz and Skinner stayed in El Salvador for one month and went back to the original clinic that Betz had worked at the summer before.

"We met with the president of the hospital, doctors and board of trustees to discuss their needs and

how to allocate the resources and disperse the goods," Betz said.

Betz and Skinner worked in the clinic and went to the schools to vaccinate the children three days a week, and spent another three days building houses.

"We would walk up and down the seashore looking for kids to teach them how an instant of pain would add years to their lives," he said. "It was really hard because the parents wouldn't understand how inflicting pain on their children was going to help them so they would live longer."

Betz even volunteered in an orphanage and would hang out with the children and keep them company.

"It feels like a mission all over again," he said. "You just crave that feeling."

Randy Belliston, BYU swim teammate, said Betz is more concerned about other people than himself.

"He would give his shirt off his back to anybody," said Belliston, 23, a junior from Magna, majoring in finance.

After a month, it was time to go home and Betz sold the van for \$500 to a company and flew home.

This summer, Betz is doing things a little differently on his third trip.

He asked his home stake to donate children's clothing, white shirts and ties. A guy Betz is working with in California donated a midrange size Uhaul truck for Betz to use to take more supplies down to El Salvador. He is also taking three good friends to share the experience with this year.

"We are going to stop in Mexico and donate clothing to the poverty stricken people there," Betz said. "We are also going to stop in Guatemala and leave other things that we have had donated and then head down to El Salvador with the rest of the medical supplies."

Betz said it will be easier to disperse the materials this year because of his connections from past years; he knows the materials are going to the right people.

His experiences in El Salvador just keep getting better and he has really found a way to help people, and not just in a medical way, Betz said.

"I absolutely love serving these people because I can't stop thinking about them," Betz said. "We have so much. They don't even know what heating is. Everybody wants to help out these people, they just don't know how."

His goal is to help educate the people in order to help themselves to be self-dependent one day.

"It is an amazing feeling to be a part of the Lord's service and really feel what it is like," Betz said.

Angela Stevens, a good friend of Betz, said he is one of the most selfless people she has ever met.

"I did not even know that he had done so many amazing things until other people had told me," said Stevens, 22, a senior from Kansas City, Kan., majoring in exercise science.

As school comes to a close again this spring, and students are wondering what they will do this summer, Betz is making his plans for the drive to Central America between spring and summer terms on his third adventure to help save more lives.

"I want to do this trip every year until I can't do it any longer," Betz said.