

BYU students give aid around the globe through HELP International

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Photo courtesy of Natalie Wright

A woman and her children were forced to shacks on the edge of the flooded Choluteca River caused by Hurricane Mitch in Honduras. She is just one of thousands who have lost everything in recent floods.

By SARA GILES

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On the coast of Honduras, a small shack precariously balances on the edge of the river. Inside, a mother and her children huddle under cardboard slats in the only shelter available to them.

Due to numerous natural disasters, this mother's plight is not an unusual one. Many Central and South American countries are struggling with the devastating effect of natural disasters on their economies and people.

BYU students have galvanized into action with HELP International, a microcredit and humanitarian service organization. Students established this in response to floods last year from Hurricane Mitch in Honduras. This is the second year that students from BYU have been involved.

Students travel to third world Central and South American countries to partner with already established organizations. These microcredit institutions receive a large amount of money that is raised by the students to form banks. Students also work with partner institutions to help assess the efficiency of the microcredit models.

Students last summer helped in setting up local banks for 20 hours a week. For at least 20-30 hours of their time, they also worked in humanitarian service areas that were of interest to them in the community. Service projects ranged from volunteering in refugee camps, clinics, orphanages and educating high school kids about AIDS. They also built houses for hurricane victims and formed a youth program.

This year, students are traveling to Honduras, Peru, Venezuela and El Salvador.

Lisa Jones, 30, MBA/MA international development from Santa Rosa, Calif., and director of this year's HELP project said she became hooked on helping the previous summer.

"We initially did it because we were so moved by Hurricane Mitch. But once you live side by side with these people, you will never be the same. I learned more there than in 2 years of business school about management and teamwork."

Jones also said that along with temporal needs, she felt that as a group they were able to help spiritually as well.

"Just our presence in these disaster areas made members feel that the United States members really cared about what happened to them," Jones said.

Students who participate in HELP International come from all different fields but say they think the hard work and service reward will be worth the time that they are donating. Many returned missionaries expressed the desire to return to countries where they served their missions and help in ways that they were unable to on their missions.

Robin Day, 22, a junior majoring in business marketing from Twin Falls, Idaho, said that he felt that this was the chance he was looking for.

"I want to get down and be more like the people than ever before. As a missionary, there was a certain distance and I want to close that gap and relate to people on a more casual basis."

However, helping doesn't come without a price. Each student is responsible to raise at least \$2,750. Students live at the same level of the people they serve. And in many cases last year, students only had access to hot water on the weekends.

Due to the health risks, students must have the appropriate shots, as safety is a major concern for students according to Jones. They must also abide by the safety cautions of the field instructors take a class in sanitation and health before they depart. Students usually live with families and are immersed in the cultures of the areas that they are serving in.

Motivations for going to serve range from person to person. Field Director of the Venezuela program, Jenny Oman, 25, a graduate student in international relations, explains.

"We're not giving handouts. We are empowering them. Our main efforts will be helping in the long-term. We are involved in helping people make their lives better. It's a big chain," Oman said.

For more information on donations, email Davis Bell at dtbell@hotmail.com.