

## **Top 5 Reasons you need to experience the El Salvador Ministry at St. Elizabeth**

My daughter and I were fortunate to go on the St. Elizabeth Youth Trip to El Salvador this past March. Trying to boil down the experience to a 'Top 5' list is a little absurd, I know, as it was so much bigger of an adventure than that. But I wanted to share some of the most valuable lessons and experiences we had as they are life altering in the most meaningful ways – for us as individuals' part of this wonderful parish, and those we were so lucky to spend time with while on our adventure.

### ***#5 You are Changing Lives***

I knew from the start this trip would open my daughter's eyes – and mine – to a world we'd never spent much time thinking about or engaging with. I of course wasn't aware of the full extent to what this eye- opening experience would feel like or how it would change us, but I can promise you, this ministry and trip delivers 10-fold what you could possibly hope for.

More importantly, beyond our lives being changed for the better, the scholarship program the St. Elizabeth El Salvador Ministry supports is having an incredible impact – not just on the children receiving scholarships, but entire communities. Local community leaders and elders help select the scholarship students and this responsibility is not taken lightly. Children who receive the scholarships have a sense of great pride and know what they've received is special and honorable. These children then grow up through the scholarship program not only learning in school but doing projects to support their community. As the children graduate and age-out of the scholarship program, there is still community expectation that these former scholarship honorees now help the new scholarship students. So they lead their own service projects in the community and organize the activities we attend with the students while visiting, being visible leaders where it matters most – in their home community. This scholarship program is enriching entire neighborhoods and towns, instilling pride and building leaders to help make positive change.

### ***#4 You are Supporting a Top-Notch Non-Profit Organization***

Kansas City is a giving community at-large with hundreds of non-profits; I've worked at several through my career and gotten to know the broader network of non-profits. I can honestly say that Centro de Intercambio y Solidaridad (also

known more simply as 'CIS') is an organization well worth the investment. CIS was founded in 1993 after the signing of the Peace Accords that ended the El Salvador civil war. Solidarity groups from the United States, Canada, and Europe came together with Salvadoran grassroots organizations to address the root causes of the war and develop a center for people-to-people exchange and accompaniment of Salvadoran communities in their pursuit of social and economic justice and participatory democracy. Leslie Schuld, co-founder, has devoted her life's work to this organization. 30 years she has poured herself into the program, immersed and living in the country so she's intimately aware of what's going on and carefully listening to the people in the communities to figure out how her organization can help; and she has surrounded herself with an incredible team of professionals to execute her vision. The unique model she's helped build of finding parishes in the U.S. to support the scholarship programs and identifying communities and schools that not only need help but are ready to receive and act on this help, is unique and promoting sustainable, meaningful change in the lives of thousands. This organization delivers on promoting solidarity among communities in El Salvador and around the world while strengthening the social fabric of El Salvadoran communities, promoting human development and contributing to the transformation of Salvadoran society.

### ***#3 You Grow Closer with Fellow Parishioners***

Going on this trip is a personally moving experience, but what makes it extra amazing is the opportunity you have to grow with fellow parishioners and classmates. You come from similar backgrounds but are having so many first time, unique experiences right alongside each other. The days are filled with exposure to people, activities and culture that are new and exciting, so to be able to come back in the evenings, or even on the bus rides, have conversations about what you're seeing and experiencing is incredible. The wheels in your head are churning to process it all, and you can see your fellow parishioners going through the same processing: how does this affect me? How can I relate this to my life? What behaviors might I need to shift based on the new things I'm learning? Having close conversations with those on the trip with you truly builds your human connection with your parish.

### ***#2 You Make Connections that Go Beyond Borders and Words***

I'm an introvert at heart, so I knew going into this trip I was going to be emotionally and physically exhausted....but for all the right reasons and all in good ways. Evelyn and Kat, CIS professional staff who help organize the trips our parish takes to El Salvador, were with us everywhere we went to help explain the history and culture we were experiencing as well as help with translation when we were spending time with those in the local communities – they were a God send and so critical to making this immersive experience so special. But even still, by the end of most days, my personal battery was running low – and honestly these are when I had some of my most meaningful experiences.

One night, we were at a campfire, everyone gathered round eating a wonderful meal the students and community members had prepared. I sat close by so I could see and hear everything going on but far enough away – and alone – that I could give this introvert a little break. But then a young child under 5 came and sat by me and I shared my meal with him; eventually one of the students came and gave the boy his own plate of food and he shared with me. Then an elderly woman came and sat by me. You could see the pride and peace she had in her heart right on her face. She lamented about our group having only one day left to visit in her community and how sad that was. Neither the boy or the elderly woman cared that I couldn't speak Spanish or understand every word they said, we just shared that moment together, eating and communing. We shared smiles and hugs under the stars of a beautiful evening. It was amazing.

### ***#1 You Might Just Learn Something About Yourself and Your Community***

This is an understatement; you will learn and see so much you can't help but walk away without trying to make connections to your life and your own community back home. After spending an amazing day with the students doing activities and visiting their homes, someone in our group asked one of the students what they felt they could use the most at their school. The young woman thought for a second and then said plumbing in their bathroom so the toilets would flush and clean drinking water onsite. Two things that would never cross my kids' minds as a desire as they are just expectations and givens where we live. Of course this young woman deserves those things in her home and school; it's hard not to hear that without the urge to act to make things better...for her....for those in need in our community. The desire to act after the experiences you have on this trip is real as you learn just how amazingly fortunate we all are.

### ***So What Now?***

For me, there truly is no better way to ground myself in my spirituality than stepping outside my comfort zone of Kansas City, learning about new cultures and countries, and meeting people who live thousands of miles away and making real human connections. We are living such different lives, but in the end, we all want so many of the same fundamental things: homes to live in where we are loved, schools for our children to attend and learn, jobs to help us support our lives and communities, personal safety and peace. For me, the sense of solidarity and oneness you experience on this trip with the people you meet and communities that welcome you in like you are one of their own....it is transformative. It is a connectivity of meaningful magnitude that brings you closer to understanding why you are here, who you are meant to be, and how you can serve the greater good.

So yes, I highly encourage you to go on the next trip to El Salvador with this parish ministry. If you can't go on the trip, support the fundraisers the ministry hosts, welcome and greet the scholarship students who come to visit our parish, learn about the organization CIS which makes the trips possible, have a conversation with someone who went on a trip with the ministry. Being a part of the magic of this ministry is well worth your time.

Annie Redd

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