Gateway students a world away in Costa Rica

Huntington — Eight high school girls and two members of the Gateway staff met at Bradley International Airport at 4:30 a.m. on Saturday, April 15 and travelled to Costa Rica to volunteer for nine days over spring vacation. This was the second trip to Costa Rica taken by Gateway students in a combined Spanish and science educational tour.

At the Estacion Las Tortugas, the girls split into small groups to patrol the beach for leatherback turtles. Biologists had the girls walking along the 3-mile stretch of beach at 10 p.m. with no flashlights in the Costa Rican heat. It wasn’t the most enjoyable experience until they came upon a couple of female leatherback turtles coming out of the water to lay their eggs. Students formed into smaller groups so most were able to see a turtle. Some even helped the biologists collect the eggs, and tag and measure the mothers.

For the next two nights and three days, the group stayed with Costa Rican families living in a small community. Towards the end of their stay, the girls gave their host families gifts like maple syrup, t-shirts, nail polish, lotion and coloring books. During the community stay, the group also got back together to plant trees as a part of a reforestation project that started about a decade ago. Instead of swimming in a river one afternoon, the girls asked a group of Costa Rican boys from the community to play a game of soccer. The Gateway girls lost because as Manuel, the Eco-teach guide, told them, “Soccer is the most popular religion in Costa Rica.”

A stop made during one day was to an elementary school. Each grade performed a dance, played soccer, blew bubbles and talked with the high school students. Many older kids from sixth grade even asked the travelers questions in English. Gateway students handed out gifts like soccer balls, bubble wands and stickers to students at the school. The group ate lunch at the school after the kids went back to class.

Other places that were visited were the Asis Wild Animal Rescue Center, an organic farm where the group worked to earn their dinner, the Jardin Pierella Butterfly Farm, a boat ride to look at the wildlife along a river and multiple stops made at small markets.

On the final full day of the trip, students and chaperones took part in ziplining! They returned to Hartford around midnight on Sunday, April 23.

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Photo (left to right): Chaperone (and high school secretary) Debra Robbins, Madison Bang, Chloe Otterbeck, Megan Wright (orange shirt), Erica Wolfe, Alyssa Donaruma, their translator, Clarissa Tweed, Dayna Britland and Anna Pless during their reforestation project, as part of their trip to Costa Rica. (Taking the picture was chaperone and Spanish teacher Desiree Rivera-Perez.)

Below: the author (Chloe Otterbeck) makes a new acquaintance at the Asis Wild Animal Rescue Center. Once rehabilitated—which includes forming a ‘family’ group for survival—monkeys will be released into the wild.

Bottom: Gateway senior Anna Pless speaks with students at the School El Carmen, founded in 2003.