



by Dawn Alford

A ROAD LESS TRAVELED

On the outskirts of Ensenada, Mexico, some five miles from the city and down a two-mile dirt road is Casa Horizonte (Horizon House) Orphanage, a complex that serves as the home for abandoned and severely ill special needs children.

The orphanage is near capacity with nine children ranging in ages from seven to 17, all with different needs. Three girls have varying degrees of autism spectrum disorder along with other conditions; one with Down's syndrome. One girl has no disabilities but is the sister of one of two blind girls.

And then there are Juan and Carlos. The nine- and 10-year-old brothers suffer from microcephaly and cerebral palsy. Due to their disorders, they have speech and intellectual disabilities as well as temperament issues. Although they can walk a little, Juan and Carlos typically crawl on their hands and knees.

In steps Gabriel "Gabe" Dominguez.

The CWU clinical physiology senior spent his winter quarter working in the orphanage alongside a nurse and a small staff—all volunteers. While he was there to satisfy

the capstone part in his degree requirements, his 10-week extensive clinical field experience would prove to be so much more.

WORLDS APART

Dominguez has chosen a challenging career. To become a physical therapist, he must first be accepted into a post-baccalaureate program—which is highly competitive.

According to Clinical Physiology director and professor Vincent "Vince" Nethery, when professional programs are evaluating applicants, everyone is competitive. The vast majority of applicants are bright, have good GPAs, and have satisfied the required courses needed to apply. Accordingly, there are considerably more applications than seats.

So how is a student to differentiate himself?

"Spending 10 weeks in an orphanage with congenitally-challenged children in Ensenada, Mexico is not what every applicant is going to have in their portfolio," Nethery said.

Dominguez is part of a small minority of clinical physiology students who have chosen to complete their clinical experience abroad and under adverse conditions.

“These students have to be a little bit adventurous and a little beyond mainstream thinking to want to engage in a fairly extensive clinical experience—not only in a different country but in a somewhat different culture,” Nethery said. “They are going to stand out because of their willingness to experience something that most other applicants would not.”

While this was a major factor in Dominguez choosing to study abroad, he had additional reasons.

Rewind five years to when Dominguez first traveled to Casa Horizonte with his church. The experience made a lasting impression on him and he vowed to return some day to help the children. Years later, he returned to the orphanage with not only a passion to serve others, but also with the experience gained from college courses and his work in a physical therapy clinic.

OVERCOMING OBSTACLES

While each of the children in the orphanage have their own unique challenges, Dominguez had his own.

“The language barrier was huge,” Dominguez admitted.

When he first arrived, Dominguez spoke very little Spanish and only one staff member spoke English.

Additionally, Juan and Carlos cannot verbally speak, but mostly communicate using sign language. He would have to learn not one language but two.

Dominguez worked every day to learn the languages. He utilized his time with the children to practice communicating in Spanish and took classes to learn sign. As he gained proficiency, he began talking with adults. By the end, he was able to hold conversations, although his understanding of grammar wasn’t always perfect.

Dominguez also found his new language proficiency had an unexpected benefit when he returned home.

“Being Mexican by heritage, a lot of my extended family speaks Spanish and for a lot of them it’s their only language,” he said. “My grandma cried when we started talking in Spanish, as it is her first language and up until now our relationship was strictly in English.”

Another obstacle Dominguez encountered was trying to help someone who at times resisted being helped. It was apparent that the children did not always see the big picture of the benefits to be gained and sometimes became less cooperative.

The experience taught him to become more patient.

“It’s easy to let my emotions get the best of me when I’m working over 70 hours a week and I’m tired, so sometimes I didn’t see the big picture, either,” he recalled, adding with a laugh, “I’ve learned a lot from these kids.”

MEANINGFUL EXPERIENCE

According to Nethery, the CWU Clinical Physiology program provides its students with an extensive immersion into clinical work. At the end of the field experience, students have a good idea of the day-to-day functions of their intended profession.

He said some other programs that may require 40 to 50 hours of field experience cannot compare.

“It’s not that these shorter experiences are not valuable; it’s that they don’t give those students the all-day every-day experiences of turning up at 7:30 in the morning and not leaving until 5:00 o’clock and seeing the range of patients that are cared for within that particular health care setting—all day, every day,” Nethery said.

CWU students engaging in the 10-week clinical experience typically work 40 hours a week for a total of 400 hours. This is considerably more time than most programs, according to Nethery.

LIFE-AFFIRMING WORK

Dominguez was solely responsible for the care of Juan and Carlos. The brothers required extensive help in the everyday aspects of their lives: bathing, brushing teeth, getting dressed, and their physical therapy sessions.

The goal of Casa Horizonte is to make all the kids as independent as possible. This is especially challenging with children suffering from congenital diseases.

Dominguez maintained a journal during his experience and his first journal entry after being at the orphanage for just a week clearly indicated he had his work cut out for him:

“Carlos and Juan are very difficult to deal with,” he wrote. “Everything is a battle, including going to the bathroom. I can already tell this will be very good for my patience as a future therapist and parent.”

Even with his initial apprehension, Dominguez and the staff noticed the boys started showing progress early on, which gave him the needed encouragement to continue.

But improvement took time.

About half way through Dominguez’s clinical, there was a significant change. Juan and Carlos wanted to do everything with him. The staff pointed it out and began joking with Dominguez, calling the boys “his sons.”

“Seeing them become more functional and independent was huge for me and it let me know that I was doing the right thing in being there,” Dominguez said.

Juan and Carlos made huge advancements. Upon Dominguez’s departure, they were able to walk short distances—40 feet at a time—without the assistance of walkers.

Accomplishments like these are what motivate Dominguez to want to become a physical therapist. His passion lies in trying to help improve a person’s quality of life so that individual can be a more functional human being.

In fact, he said his clinical field experiences have been life—and career—affirming.

“Carlos and Juan will go down as the first ‘patients’ of my career and also as my brothers without a doubt,” he said. “Luckily, I don’t have to worry about ever forgetting them because I plan on going back down this winter and many times after that.”