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Paying to Work

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By Hardy Raab

What 20-year-old German would lay out his own money to repair a school in Nicaragua? Not everyone is willing to toil and sweat where the mercury often breaks 100 and while tourists are frolicking in the Pacific surf not even two miles away.

Wolfgang, Martin, Bruno, Thomas and Tony, all from Cologne; Ralf and

Gerd from Overath-Marialinden, plus two friends just returned from Nicaragua. These students and young professionals spent three weeks fixing up a primary school, along with other youths from a village next to the capital.

There they plastered, scraped and painted walls, windows and doors; they installed grills, not to mention buying 25 desks and installing two bathrooms. Diriamba is a fishing hamlet about 50 miles south of Managua, where scarcity is a way of life. Their plain houses usually come without bathrooms and electricity. A single well supplies what little water is to be had. Yet its inhabitants are rich in hospitality.

Blond workers

“How grateful they were,” remarks Gerd Schmitz. “There was this family that invited us to eat, though the father had to work on Sunday to put

food on the table.” Thomas Doller, an engineer with Ford Germany, explains that “the villagers said this was the first time they'd ever seen foreigners work. Till then they'd only seen them in a vacation mode.”

And how did this working vacation leave the nine participants, besides tired and blistered? Recounts Stefan, “It's the best way to get to know a country. You work next to them and you realize how they live and what concerns them.”

The German young men paid not only for the trip, housing and meals, but they also emptied their pockets to cover much of the construction material. What they couldn't raise themselves, they supplemented with the help of relatives and friends, plus some additional contributions from the Nicaraguan government and a Holy See fund.

Repaid in smiles

The mind behind these unusual vacations is Martin Klein, engineer and director of Cologne's Schweidt, a student residence. Six years ago he went to Guatemala with a dozen young men to mitigate the devastation of a hurricane.

A few years back Martin attended a seminar organized to boost undeveloped nations organized by other members of Opus Dei. Students from other European nations were giving a transatlantic hand to various social projects in Central America, he learned. Back in Cologne he asked some of the residents if they were interested.

The annual response since has been that some dozen men, aged 18 to 25, get their hands dirty far from home. They know they're not going to change the world. But at least now a hundred children find their schoolhouse fit and more pleasant.

Martin and his co-workers know that the experience has been worth while. However much it cost them, they return enriched. “What an experience,” exclaims Markus. “At times you're beat from so much work in the sun. But then somehow the smiles and cheers of those Nicaraguan children all over the place spur you on to keep going.”

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