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Bolton woman extends a hand of friendship to remote community in Trinidad

Written By MARK PAVILONS

Helping others is at the top of the list for a Bolton university student.

Alexandria (Lexie) Hesketh-Pavilons decided to spend her reading week doing what she loves ? volunteering abroad and engaging with others.

Through Western University's Alternative Spring Break (ASB), Hesketh-Pavilons and the small group of students spent a week in the remote village of Matelot, Trinidad.

The ASB experience, she said, fits in really well with her program and future career, which includes development and community projects abroad.

?I also just love engaging with cultures aside from my own, and seeing how communities all around the world are thriving and are unique in their own ways.

?Ever since I got to Western in first year I knew I wanted to go on ASB, but it was never the right time until this year, and wow was it ever worth the wait!?

Matelot is an almost forgotten community of just over 500, located in a remote area of the island's northern coast. Beauty aside, Matelot has survived against the odds, relying on local resources to sustain its inhabitants.

The visiting students spent time in the local schools and working on a drainage project.

The students took local youngsters on a field trip to the zoo in the capital of

Port of Spain. While the children enjoyed the outing, they noted the city is simply too busy and dangerous for them. They much prefer the safest, albeit most isolated, community in the country.

Hesketh-Pavilons was taken by the simplicity of life there, and the friendliness of those living there.

?You see fishermen taking their boats out, children attending school (there are three schools in Matelot), police officers chatting with community members, and more. The women from the Dorcas Women's Group greeted us with smiles every morning, ensuring we were well taken care of, and making meaningful conversations with us, as if we have lived with them for years.

?Being there for a week felt like I was there for a year in how quickly every single local made a point to ask me who I was and how I was enjoying Matelot.?

Her advocacy came in when she discovered that Matelot was neglected by the government in terms of funding and infrastructure. The hilly area is prone to floods and landslides, and in fact, suffered devastating landslides that cut off roads and destroyed bridges, leaving residents cut off from the rest of the world.

?They persevere anyway,? she said, noting children attend school, men and women remain productive to uphold the community of Matelot.

The Trinidadians are one with nature and know how to live off the land, from using a plant leaf as a drinking cup, to finding coconuts.

Agriculture and fishing are the main activities there, and farmers raise coffee beans, cocoa, oranges, etc.

The Dorcas Women's Group also takes good care of their community, hosting

fundraisers and barbecues to bring people together.

In sharing photos from Canada, the locals remarked at the size of our houses.

?Why would you need so many rooms in your house they asked. Why indeed.

?They were right, and they taught me to value closeness and the connection to things outside your front door a lot more,? Lexie said.

?I feel as if I offered some of the people I met there my friendship and positivity. I was very outgoing and made an effort to have a conversation with everyone and showed interest in their lives.?

One of the team leaders asked a woman from the Dorcas Women's Group how groups like Western's have an impact on the community.

?Just your presence here is impact enough,? was the answer. ?People here look forward to your annual visits, because it gives us a chance to engage with the global community, because most of us in Matelot rarely get the chance to go outside of Matelot at all.?

In a way, these students are bringing the world to them.

A week comes and goes quickly, and Hesketh-Pavilons always feels a void when she leaves a community she visits. She asked one of the community leaders how they feel about it.

?Yes we will miss you, but we must not think that way, because we can keep in contact through email and Facebook. I teach my kids acceptance. I taught them that nothing lasts forever, but to be grateful for the memories and present moments that we have. This is similar to groups like you guys ??ou will not be here forever, but your memory will be, as students you inspire students from

Matelot to continue their education.?

Most students don't continue after high school, and there is no post-secondary school in Matelot.

The university partners with Amazade, a fair-trade learning organization, leaders in responsible global service-learning.

During their time in Matelot, they engaged with Matelot's primary school around

STEM education and joint experiential learning opportunities. This program also supported the goal of increasing the number of field trips available to their students, to hear about and see, first-hand, the ways they can apply their learning to real-life situations and explore career opportunities.

The university students also helped create a number of trenches, which direct flood waters away from the homes during storms.

Being totally immersed in another culture, Lexie and her group fully understood the viewpoints and challenges of residents in?Matelot. They also learned humility.

Hesketh-Pavilons always feels a void upon her return home. She grows attached to the people she interacts with. These experiences

complement her studies and shore up her skills to aid, advocacy and international networking.

?We are who we are through the connections we make with others,? she observed.

Next up for Lexie is a 5-week volunteer trip to Kigali, Rwanda this May.

She was selected from a small, select group to participate in a hands-on

immersive volunteer mission. It's an interdisciplinary experiential learning course providing students with an opportunity to learn about Rwandan society by engaging directly with local residents, and bringing aid to where it's needed.

She will be working with disadvantaged youth.

Lexie brings with her extensive volunteer experience in places such as The

Dominican Republic, Kenya and Guatemala.

There are no subsidies and students have to pay the full cost. The airfare alone to Rwanda is very expensive. While attending university, Lexie works part-time and still finds time to volunteer and help the homeless in London, Ont.

She's asking for public support in her gofundme campaign to help her reach her goal. For more, visit

https://www.gofundme.com/help-local-volunteer-help-others-in-rwanda

?The world may not be at its best place right now. But maybe we can fix it. It all starts by making a contribution to society.,? she said.