Crossing borders to study human rights

BY CHAD GRAVES

As an international studies major here at the Hilltop, I studied abroad in Costa Rica during the spring 2005 semester. Before my trip, I visited the Office of International Programs at Birmingham-Southern and several study-abroad fairs on campus trying to figure out exactly where I wanted to go.

The program I selected is in San José, Costa Rica, the capital of an eco-tourist’s paradise. The country is best known for its large protected rainforests and coffee plantations. My program was run by the CIDH or “International Center for Human Development,” which operates in conjunction with the Universidad Latina. It is a research organization that works with the Costa Rican government and several international aid agencies.

My interest in the region came from the Latin American Studies courses I have taken at BSC, and from working with the Birmingham City Schools ESL program and the city’s Hispanic Interest Coalition of Alabama. I also had a strong desire to become fluent in the Spanish language.

I was instantly attracted to the CIDH program when I saw it dealt with themes of human rights, poverty, and economic development—very relevant topics in the lives of our own country’s immigrants. The program consists of justice, gender, and political studies.

Another important theme students examined was sustainable development for developing nations: solutions to poverty, corporate social responsibility, access to education, etc. The CIDH curriculum afforded us visits to government offices, including the Ombudsman, the Inter-American Human Rights Court, and other similarly influential offices in the field of advocacy.

I arrived in Costa Rica amid a volatile political landscape, at the center of which was the U.S.-sponsored Central American Free Trade Agreement. All of a sudden, everyone was interested in my political opinions, wanted to know which president I supported, and asked me to accompany them to their street demonstrations.

As human rights students at CIDH, we were given the chance to experience humble rural life, city life, and life amidst urban poverty, as well as to develop comprehensive solutions to the social problems. Some people might easily misconstrue our trip as “poverty tourism,” but what our group was doing was far from it.

For me, our studies of urban and rural poverty were the most interesting because they are two completely different kinds of poverty. We spent a week on rural farms in the humid tropics, working with the EARTH University sustainable campus.

As part of an exercise on creating responsible social policy, we visited public health clinics accompanied by local aid workers, within the capital city’s most deprived “barrios.” By doing this, we were able to see how volunteer doctors are combating the problem of limited healthcare access for Costa Rica’s large undocumented immigrant population. Their main goal is the prevention of curable illnesses through education.

In hindsight, my trip helped me to realize how expansive and rampant the problem of poverty is just beyond our nation’s southern border. The only word to describe it is unbelievable—to see the wealth disparities in the way one group of society lives and another subsists.

With the guidance of Dr. Jessica Ramos-Harithun, BSC assistant professor of Spanish, and her published “Transnational Classroom” model, two classes of BSC Spanish students were also able to benefit from the CIDH study-abroad trip. Four separate videoconferences were conducted from the college’s Foreign Languages Lab, via the Internet. My Costa Rican friends and I were able to receive updates on life at BSC, share our accounts of life in Costa Rica, and discuss quirky cultural differences between the two places.

While I was studying in Costa Rica, I had to assimilate into their culture, but I have returned home with a renewed sense of everything that is so unique about my own culture. The opportunity to live abroad literally allowed me to see my own home country from the “other side of the fence.” I feel grateful that I was able to study abroad.

Editor’s Note: Graves is a junior international studies major from Franklin, Tenn. Hallie Dyer, a junior studio art major from McMinnville, Tenn., currently is attending the 2007 spring semester program at CIDH.
Fill it up—The college’s billboard adjacent to campus on Interstate I-20/59 recently underwent a much-needed overhaul. A new design was installed in April which features two Birmingham-Southern students and encourages travelers to exit and add “fuel to their minds.” Shown on the billboard are Noopur Vakharia (above), a junior interdisciplinary biology-psychology major from Hartselle, and Wilson Nash, a senior interdisciplinary political science-religion major from Mountain Brook.