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TIS grad thrives in service learning abroad

"I lived with a host family in San Carlos, a rural town of 600 people," explains TIS graduate Riley Stevenson about her summer volunteering in Costa Rica for Amigos de las Americas. "My family had 16 children, and there were other families of similar size. We went to different houses each day for lunch and dinner, so I really got to know the community. I liked being in a rural area; I really like the style of life they have there.

"I was very nervous before I went - to fly down by myself and not know anyone there. But as soon as I met my host family, I was happy. I was in the town with two other Amigos partners, people I didn't know before. No one there spoke English. My Spanish was a lot better than my partners', so I was the one who led everything. My partners and I would plan our lessons each day - we were teaching children about environmental health issues like recycling, deforestation and protecting the environment. We taught for two hours each day in a classroom with about 30 kids.

"We also organized a community-based initiative. The project had to be something the community wanted - Amigos didn't want us going in and saying, 'you need this'. So our project was to paint the local school which hadn't been painted in about 30 years. We had to do everything: apply for a grant, figure out where we could get the paint and how to get it transported to our village, and we had to organize volunteers.

"I liked teaching and the project, but the trip was really more of a cultural experience. I learned how people live there, I learned leadership skills and gained confidence meeting new people. I also made great friends - my host Dad cried when I left. I will go back in December to visit."

Costa Rica was Riley's second experience volunteering in Latin America. After tenth grade, Riley volunteered for a week in Tijuana, Mexico with Los Embajadores. "That trip really piqued my interest in global affairs. I read newspapers and really care what is happening in different countries.

"For example, there is a lot about immigration issues in the news. In Tijuana I went to an immigrant center, I saw people cross the border, I listened to their stories. I understand what issues they have at home, why they need



jobs, why they want to come here."

Riley feels that if she hadn't known Spanish, she wouldn't have had these experiences. "At TIS not only did I learn Spanish, which really gave me an advantage, but it also prepared me to be more culturally sensitive. I learned about different cultures because my teachers were from so many different countries. That was an issue for some volunteers in Costa Rica - they didn't know what to think or how to respond when they saw things that were different. But it felt comfortable to me. I even recognized some of the children's songs because I had sung them myself at TIS."

Riley Stevenson graduated from TIS in June 2003. She attended The Madeleine School for grades 6-8 and is currently a senior at Central Catholic High School. Riley is applying to colleges for programs in international relations and journalism.

Amigos de las Americas facilitates transformational community service involving more than 20,000 youth volunteers and thousands of communities in Latin America.

Los Embajadores runs service trips to sites in Northern Mexico fostering relationships with host communities, organizing work projects, and coordinating cultural programs.

