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HUMANITARIAN WORK IN TAOS

A new roof and a new life thanks to Vanier students

What could be worse than losing your daughter because of a house? That's exactly what thirteen Vanier College Architectural Technology students helped one family avoid when they travelled to Taos, New Mexico, last May and June, to participate in a Habitat for Humanity initiative and build a house for a single mother with a severely handicapped daughter.

"If this house would not be built before the winter," says student Cora Cheung, "the hospital would have taken away the daughter because the mother was no longer capable of the caring for her on a daily basis in the house they lived in."

One student indicated that she spent most of her time working on the roof, setting the waterproofing sheets, the styrofoam insulation, and the tar paper coat in preparation for the final fused membrane that would conclude the roofing of the house. "This experience was extremely enriching as I got to see first-hand all the elements that I had studied previously in class," indicates Melody Loria.

But she adds that "meeting the future home owner was also quite an experience. She expressed how much our help touched her personally, and this alone was rewarding. I learned so much during this week, about team work and humanitarian service. I learned that there are people all over the world who need help, socially, financially and physically, and that there are means to help them. Above all, I learned that there are ways for me to do my part."

The Taos project was part of an annual class trip to discover architecturally interesting places. One of the highlights was a visit to the thousand-year old Taos Pueblo, a UNESCO World Heritage site still inhabited by the Tiwa people. "The structure was intriguing," commented one student. "It's a multi-storey complex built of adobe and is still standing today."

Another high point was a visit to the National Bandelier Monument, which is set in the backdrop of the Frijoles Canyon and contains the ruins of dwellings that were once inhabited by the indigenous people. "Our hike through these cave dwellings carved into the soft volcanic rock of the cliff was a discovery of ancient archaeology that I've never encountered before," said student Milli Nath-Chowdhury. "Only in literature have I read about such living quarters, but seeing this was astonishing."

Learning about different building techniques, seeing how materials and architectural styles have responded to the demands of geography and climate, and above all working on a construction site for a humanitarian purpose, made this an invaluable experience for all the students where could put into practice what they learned in the classroom.