

St. Joseph High School

Immersion program

TRUMBULL—Mari Andrzejewski's life changed dramatically — at 14 years old.

As a freshman at St. Joseph High School, her view of what matters in life was transformed when she went on a trip to Nicaragua as part of the Francis Xavier International Scholars Program and saw a world she never knew existed—a world the Gospel called her to change.

She heard a woman named Yamilette talk about the 15 years she spent living in a Managua landfill and the horrors she witnessed, including the time a little boy was rummaging through garbage and died after he ate what he thought was a piece of chocolate but was rat poison.

Mari saw streets filled with trash, tin hovels where families lived, hundreds of stray dogs and starving animals, and other sights that led her to an appreciation of the Gospel, and the importance of love and charity.

"Something clicked," she wrote in a presentation for her classmates. "My heart collapsed for the unfortunate lives of these people, and all I wanted to do was give them the clothes off my back, the money in my pockets and the love in my heart."

She returned with the realiza-

tion that as residents of Fairfield County, we're among the richest on the globe and have a moral obligation to make the world a better place. As St. Joseph's motto says, with privilege comes responsibility.

Maureen Anderson, director of the immersion program and director of co-curricular activities at St. Joseph's, said, "We want this to be a transformative experience. Very often, their understanding of what is normal goes through a paradigm shift. They come back changed young people because they have a new lens to look at the world."

The program, named after the 16th century Jesuit missionary who spread the Gospel throughout Asia, was developed to give students an opportunity to encounter different cultures and examine the "social realities of a community from cultural, economic, religious and historical perspectives."

"I teach the world religion course and tell students their roommates and their neighbors are going to be people of different faiths and cultures, and they have to walk in solidarity with them," Anderson said. "I want them to achieve an openness of spirit and willingness to dialogue with those

who have different understandings of life."

During the 2017-2018 school year, there will be six immersion trips.

In 2018, students and faculty will travel to Rome in February, China in April, Colombia in June, and Maine in July to work with First Nations people and the Latino community.

St. Joseph's principal, Dr. James Keane, who provided the idea for the Francis Xavier program, said, "As a cross-cultural immersion program in a Catholic learning community, the program introduces our students to the global mission of the Church while helping them traverse the distances between culture, economics, religion and geography."

Since it was launched in 2016, 91 students and 12 faculty members have participated in six trips. Anderson said the goal is to produce students who become global scholars and learn about Catholic social teaching.

"There is a service component in each of these trips, but they are not simply 'service trips,'" she said. "Our goal is not to go to a place like Peru and build a house for the poor while the poor look on. Instead, in keeping with Pope



SENIOR EMMA BERGER HOLDS A CHILD at San Francisco Libre cooperative in Nicaragua. Students from St. Joseph High School can take part in a Francis Xavier International Scholars Program, gaining a new understanding of people of other cultures and backgrounds.

Francis' vision of solidarity and accompaniment, we try to get to know the poor and those of other cultures and backgrounds by name, and understand their challenges, histories and cultures."

The program is open to all students, faculty and staff. Students working toward the International Scholars Certificate must make two or more trips and engage in world language study and related coursework. They then graduate as "Francis Xavier International Scholars" and receive documentation that becomes part of their high school transcript.

"These are experiences you can't get in a classroom," Anderson said. "We want to give students an understanding of the social divide between the rich and poor and help them realize we are the rich and there is a whole

lot of poor."

Seniors Nicholas and Joshua Harper are twins who will have completed the requirements when they graduate. Both went to Peru in 2016 and returned home with a deeper understanding of their faith and how God can bridge socio-economic differences.

"I was surprised to see the sharp divide between social classes, as if there was a line between the slums and the rich," Josh recalled. "It was unlike anything I had ever seen before." He recalled playing soccer with children from a poor neighborhood and how they connected spiritually. "Even though we couldn't speak their language, it was a very moving experience. It taught me Christ is everywhere on this earth and that I can connect with people who don't speak the same language because we believe in the same God."

Nicholas returned with a greater appreciation of his faith and said, "It was interesting to see how these people could be so faith-filled with so little. Even though they didn't have material possessions, they were strong in their spirituality. It's easy for us to lose sight of the importance of God when we have all these things that are falsely important to us."

One of the most profound lessons students receive is that change is possible when people are committed to social justice. On the Nicaragua trip, they witnessed a success story in Yamilette.

For years, she rummaged through the landfill to salvage magnesium and aluminum so she could make \$60 a month. Now, she runs an after-school program that she began with several women whose goal is to liberate others, like themselves, from poverty and deprivation.

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