

## UP CLOSE



The "Up Close" column highlights an outstanding nursing student. Send nominee ideas to [squalls@aol.com](mailto:squalls@aol.com).

By Sarah Qualls

# Kirsten Thulin

What happens when a nursing student from Michigan travels south of the border? The answer is simple: a whole hearted commitment to nursing as a profession and a drive to help those in need. These were Kirsten Thulin's motivators when she embarked on two trips to Latin America. A junior at the University of Michigan, Ms. Thulin went to Guatemala in 2005, then to Peru last spring.

Ms. Thulin traveled to Guatemala in 2005 as part of a Global Intercultural Experience for Undergraduates program which was developed by the nursing faculty at the University of Michigan. She traveled with ten other undergraduates and a professor who is a midwife. While in Guatemala, Ms. Thulin stayed in San Lucas Toliman, a rural village on Lake Atitlan.

"There was nothing touristy about the village," recalls Ms. Thulin. "The volunteers at the mission were the only non-Guatemalan people in the village. All eleven students traveled in the bed of a pick-up truck as transportation."

While in San Lucas Toliman, the students stayed in a local mission for a week. "The mission provided free health clinics in community buildings," says Ms. Thulin. "We did assessments and passed out non-prescription medications like Tylenol and vitamins. We had to refer a few individuals to the hospital in Guatemala City because of more serious conditions." The group also learned about the health care system of Guatemala. "It was very interesting to see the contrasts of each of the facilities. Overall health care is pretty impoverished in Guatemala. The facilities were pretty run down and sterility and cleanliness was lacking. At one of the



Kirsten Thulin at Machu Picchu in Cusco, Peru.

governmental run clinics they employed only one nurse. She worked everyday with no vacation. If she was sick, the clinic would have to shut down for the day. This was inconceivable to me. Overall, the healthcare system seemed disorganized and very scarce in rural areas."

The following week the group stayed with home-stay families in Antigua where they took Spanish lessons and toured hospitals and other healthcare facilities in the area.

Upon returning from Guatemala, Ms. Thulin immediately began to look for other opportunities to travel to Latin America. "I fell in love with the Latin American culture. I had an incredible experience in Guatemala and thought that experiencing a new Latin American country was an opportunity that I could not pass up." A fellow student mentioned the University of Michigan World Service Team, a student-operated organization. Ms. Thulin immediately began the application process for the next trip. After she was selected, the organization raised money through fundraising and the members also paid a fee to go on the trip. The World Service Team had



After returning from Guatemala, Ms. Thulin looked for other opportunities to travel to the region: “Experiencing a new Latin American country was an opportunity I could not pass up.” (Ms. Thulin pictured here in Peru.)

traveled to Ghana in the past, and the 2006 trip took Ms. Thulin to Peru.

While in Peru, Ms. Thulin stayed with a home-stay family for three weeks in the city of Huancayo. “It was very educational. I learned the most about Peru and Peruvian culture through my home-stay family. I stayed with another student who spoke Spanish much better than myself so I was pretty quiet around the house. The family was very welcoming and they were wonderful hosts.” While in Huancayo, the group volunteered at a local state-run orphanage. “We worked with infants and toddlers. Normally there are fewer than five employees at the orphanage for about 15 infants and 10 toddlers, making it nearly impossible for the children to receive the attention they need to truly thrive. The children I worked with were too young to talk, so they could not

verbally express their feelings. They wouldn’t cry because they knew it wouldn’t get them attention, and the babies all had flat heads because they spent almost 20 hours of the day in a crib. The caregivers provided all of the children’s basic needs but they were too busy and there was not enough staff to provide any secondary needs like affection, cuddling, and un-devoted attention. Therefore, as volunteers, we devoted all of our time spending quality time with the children and really developing relationships with them. It was so rewarding to see them light up everyday when we would return for another day of fun.”

Ms. Thulin also noted that many of the children had minor medical problems and in need of dental care. She noticed that, “There were Peruvian nursing students at the orphanage about three days a week. There was also a physician who would come to see the sick children. He came about two times in the three weeks we were there. It was very difficult to leave the community in which we had lived for three weeks. We knew that the children’s lives would return to what they had been before they had enriched our lives. They made it emotionally difficult to leave them, and I still think about those children everyday.”

While still in Peru, the group visited Cusco to see Machu Picchu. “Cusco was very different than Huancayo. Cusco is very touristy and very developed. There are luxury hotels and night clubs. In Huancayo, we were some of the few non-Peruvian there, but in Cusco there are a lot more tourists. Peruvians were still the majority, but there were more non-Peruvians compared to Huancayo. The entire town is run on tourism and most of the Peruvians who do live and work in Cusco speak English.”

When I asked Ms. Thulin about Machu Picchu she remarked, “It was incredible. We got to spend two days there. It is more beautiful

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in person than I could have ever imagined. I was in awe of its beauty and history. The hike up was tough but very worth it! The view was incredible.”

Ms. Thulin is an excellent example of how each of us can take our nursing skills and touch the lives of others throughout the world, as well as those close to home. She also notes how interesting it is to travel to other countries and learn about other cultures. Nevertheless she found out about some unexpected commonalities:

“Our house mom made us this oatmeal-like drink every morning and when we asked her what it was she said it was *cualquier*. This means ‘whatever’ in Spanish. We were confused about why it would be called ‘whatever’ but we didn’t ask. Later in the trip we asked why this drink was called *cualquier*. Our hosts were confused, and then started to laugh. ‘It’s not *cualquier*,’ they said. ‘It is an American product! You guys should know what it is – it’s the old man on the box! You know: Qua-ker!’ When we realized it was Quaker Oats®, we couldn’t stop laughing.”

Many politicians and world leaders could learn a lesson from Ms. Thulin’s story: although we are all different, a spirit of adventure and some patience and understanding, anything can be settled over a nice hot bowl of Quaker oatmeal. ☺