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RITA GARCIA-SZCZOTKA

Caroline and Ellen Sullivan with Tatiana (center), an eighth grader at EVA.



ELLEN SULLIVAN

The student garden at EVA.

THE ROAD TO LA GRECIA

BY ELLEN SULLIVAN

English Teacher, High Bluff Academy, Rancho Santa Fe

The road to La Grecia is rocky. Literally. The last two kilometers to the Escuela Vera Angelita are unpaved, meandering like a dry riverbed steadily upward. A half hour outside of Matagalpa deep in Nicaragua's beautiful tropical cloud forest, we pass coffee trees nestled in the shade beneath banana palms and broadleaves 1,000 meters above sea level. The road smooths out as we pull in the driveway, greeted by the cheerful sounds of dozens of girls switching classes, some running to the sports court to play soccer, others making their way to the library with floor to ceiling windows looking out over the green valley and mountains beyond.

We are the first group of Americans who sponsor EVA students to visit the campus. The school, an initiative of the U.S.-based nonprofit organization Visions Global Empowerment in partnership with philanthropist Robert D. Friedman, is an environmentally sustainable boarding school for girls in grades 5-12 who come from underserved and vulnerable communities throughout Nicaragua. Its doors opened in late January 2022 and currently there are 69 students in grades 5-8.

My school, High Bluff Academy in Rancho Santa Fe, launched the Hands Across the Hemisphere Club to sponsor Tatiana, an eighth grader at EVA. I visited EVA to meet Tatiana and her classmates, and to work with the administration and faculty to set up weekly virtual sessions between our students and theirs. Through the club, students at High Bluff Academy are not only able to establish a relationship with students at EVA, they are also learning about the challenges people face in the developing world, both in education and in preserving the environment, and how we can work together to mitigate them.

Like most developing nations, Nicaragua struggles to preserve its natural environment in the face of extreme poverty. It is a daily challenge for citizens to get access to even basic

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services; according to the World Bank, about 12 percent of the population lives on \$3 or less a day. It can be hard to imagine what that really looks like for those of us who spend more than that on a single cup of coffee.

So it is inspiring to be a part of Escuela Vera Angelita, which is on track to be a change agent for the girls and the environment in Nicaragua. Investing in the education of girls is one of the most effective ways to realize economic and environmental change. Educated girls become productive entrepreneurs and - increasingly - community leaders. They become better mothers of fewer children, and through their education accelerate changes in environmental awareness.

Not only does EVA offer young women a bi-lingual (Spanish/English) curriculum with hands-on learning, it is also fully committed to environmental sustainability and eco-education. It will become the first LEED-certified school in Nicaragua, and follows the UNESCO "Education for System Development" academic model which empowers students with the ability to address issues of global importance, particularly with regard to the environment.

EVA is tucked into the Vera Angelita Estate, an entirely self-sufficient, environmentally sustainable and organic oasis of 437 acres encompassing a nature preserve, coffee plantation, plant nursery, botanical gardens, fully functional farm, and eco-resort, all aimed at supporting the school. The school and the estate employ 170 full-time staff.

My daughter, Caroline, a junior majoring in environmental studies at UC Santa Barbara, was particularly encouraged by the ecological progress taking place at Vera Angelita. Since 2019, Estate Director Michael Bitton has been working with his staff to restore the soil, plant and water systems on the property. This has allowed for the revitalization of animal life -

birds, sloths, and monkeys have returned and become part of campus life.

The efforts of the restoration have clearly shown how important it is to preserve and take care of the land. It is the most "alive" place I have ever visited. The sounds of the birds, insects, reptiles and mammals are abundant at all times. Having the school campus in the midst of this revitalized tropical paradise allows students to "live" the importance of respecting and appreciating the land and all it supports.

The property operates an organic farm including greenhouses and plant nurseries. The students even have their own community garden as part of their curriculum. They are then taught how to take the fruits of their garden to the kitchen for preparation and meals. Creating a true farm to table experience. The meals are delicious and vegetarian, which is another reason the campus is sustainable. There are fresh eggs from their 200 chickens, and goats whose milk they use for cheese which they make on the premises. They also grow organic coffee just for estate use.

We know the future of our planet rests on the understanding that the human-nature relationship must change, and this change starts with education. The radiance and energy of Escuela Vera Angelita's 69 new students, and the expertise and commitment of the staff at every level in creating, maintaining, and teaching environmental sustainability is truly awe inspiring. The change the world needs is happening here, and the change is happening now. And we at High Bluff are a part of it.

If you'd like to get involved with EVA as well, there are many options. You can start a Hands Across the Hemisphere Club at your own school by contacting me at ellen@highbluffacademy.com.

For other ways to get involved, contact Tamara LaFarga, president of the Board of Directors of Visions Global Empowerment at tamarafit@gmail.com; or Rita Szczotka, director of development at Visions Global Empowerment at rita@visionseducation.org.

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