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Chile becomes classroom for three students

A trio of inner-city students have gotten to see how education without walls really works

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SIGHTSEERS: Jennifer Jones, the head of Jacobs Athletic Science Center, accompanies students Margie McCoy, Misty White and ZyHeart Bess on a trip to Chile.

For three students from a private inner-city school, their latest class took seven full days to finish.

That's because the class was in Chile.

And that's just the way Jennifer Jones who runs Jacobs Athletic Science Center wants it to be. To her, the world should be a classroom and students should be free to explore it.

"Chile made me experience other cultures different from ours," said 11-year-old Misty, with "experience" being the key word.

Misty was the only one of the trio who had been on a plane before — and that happened last year when Jones took a group

of students on a jaunt to Washington, D.C. The center was started last year in Wynwood and aims to help low-income kids by giving them opportunities they may not otherwise get in public schools. Jones bases the school's curriculum on closely linking classroom lessons to real-world experiences. Students often take field trips to businesses, museums and the theater, seeing the world outside their neighborhood.

"When you leave your comfort zone, that's where real learning takes place. The beauty of travel is that you can even be illiterate and still learn a whole lot," Jones said.

The trip to Chile was something extra special and the girls earned it by doing well in a Spanish class Jones created at the center in preparation for the trip.

In Chile, the Miami contingent served as guests of honor at the 25th anniversary of Coaniquem (Corporacion de Ayuda al Niño Quemado), a nonprofit organization that helps children recover from burns.

Members of the Coaniquem advisory board donated the miles to make the trip possible. Jones uses connections that come from her education consulting firm to find similar hookups for her students and the school.

"I use [the firm] to build networks and connections to make this school strong," said the 35-year-old.

Whatever she's doing seems to be working so far. The 2-year-old school has grown from 75 students the first year to 125 now ~ with most of them paying the \$3,500 tuition through scholarships.

The Chile trip started early on April 17 ~ and the girls didn't know what to expect. The flight was the first unknown, especially for Margie and ZyHeart. Even Misty, with just one trip, was still an amateur at the flying business.

The girls started crying when the plane descended and the pressure built. But they laughed about it later.

They got a bit nervous again because being the guest of honor meant speaking Spanish in front of a crowd at the celebration, even if just to say: "Hola. Felicidades."

Misty and Margie had only been learning Spanish for a month or so ~ but ZyHeart already knew some Spanish and felt more confident speaking it.

Jones thought they all did beautifully.

"It was incredible," she said. "They were engaged 100 percent of the time."

The visitors stayed at Casa Abierta, the dormitory building where most of the clinic's patients stay.

Coaniquem provides free care, and over 5,000 children from all over Latin America are treated at the center every year.

One of those kids, a 12-year-old who had lived at the clinic for most of his life, left a huge impression on the girls.

Sebastián had suffered severe burns at age 3 and, despite years of treatment, had not fully recovered ~ he still wore bandages on one arm.

The girls found a way to have fun with him, giving him an impromptu English lesson.

'We taught him to say `Shut up' and 'I'm gonna tell your teacher,' " said ZyHeart, laughing.

Margie said her favorite experiences were playing with Sebastián and taking pictures with a cute little girl called Donna whose legs were burned.

The students say they learned to look past the burned skin and the bandages. They saw a person and not a patient. They learned that the children at Coaniquem are not so different from them.

"It's just that their skin is more sensitive than ours," Margie said.

The girls say they also enjoyed new tastes, sights and sounds. The trio said they were awestruck when they saw the Andes ~ they had never seen mountains or snow.

The first-timers also remember vividly their experience at Viña del Mar, where they climbed onto rocks to get a better look at the Pacific Ocean.

Back home, the girls presented a slide show to the other kids.

"They did good," said John Estefani, the center's assistant director. "They seem to have matured a little bit."
