

# Service and Learning:

## Secondary Students investing to learn and make a difference



**“Wake up, everyone! We’re in Skopje!” My closest friends shuffled out of the dusty train cabin and into the cramped hallway to meet our two Habitat for Humanity team leaders: Mrs. Szeryk and Mrs. Lewis; who were way too chipper and upbeat for such an early morning. After almost 30 hours of hearing the monotone clacking of train tracks, we had finally made it to our destination.**

It was a long road getting here, figuratively as well as literally. We started as a small group, meeting on Friday’s afterschool in the always-welcoming classroom of Mrs. Lewis at QSI Bratislava. Our small but dynamic group spent the year focusing on fundraising for a final trip to Skopje, Macedonia as a part of Habitat for Humanity’s global village team to build homes for people in need of adequate housing. Initially, fundraising 6,000 dollars seemed like a piece of cake, but we were all foolish to think so. As cliché as it sounds, through the ups and downs, our team became more like a family. We spent Tuesday lunches, Friday afternoons, and numerous Saturdays together planning and putting to action events ranging

from simple bake sales and play days to starting annual traditions for QSIB such as “Breakfast with Santa” at the Crowne Plaza. Our Habitat family, from the very start, focused on having a positive attitude as well as always working collectively as a team and letting any concerns, problems, appraisals be discussed as a group. Our goal was enough to stay focused and driven year-round.

Without the help of family members and large corporations such as the Crowne Plaza, we wouldn’t have been able to travel to Macedonia and our year’s worth of time and effort would have held no significance in helping the less fortunate. Fortunately for us, we pulled through just in time. We

managed to collect our largest amount of money through donations from family, friends and corporations and combined with the money earned from fundraising, we reached our goal. This act alone reassured me that our team was focused and determined for the hard work yet to come at the build site.

Take 30 hours of minimal sleep on various trains, add nine exhausted teenagers, two focused parents, and two always-supporting team leaders and you get our team at 8 in the morning in Skopje. We were all complete beginners in the house-building process, but we learned quickly. Within two days we had girls digging trenches, sanding down walls, mixing cement and boys using electric drills, connecting pipelines and helping lay down cement. Five days passed by and by the end of the week we could see small changes that each of us had contributed. It was an extraordinary feeling. I originally thought that by the end of our stay in Skopje we wouldn’t have made a significant contribution to the build site as we were only one group of many volunteers which were due to come help build. As the week progressed, our dedicated team completed tasks that I later came to learn were significant in connecting to the bigger picture of the build

site’s goal. We got to meet the young family that will live in our house upon completion and saw their thankfulness and dedication to the building process as well. I was surprised at how genuinely nice everyone around me was; from the other global village team working with us, to the building advisors assigning jobs every morning, to the Macedonian people in general; everyone was extremely welcoming and it made the experience that much more significant.

The end of the week and our long-anticipated trip came to an end. As we said our goodbyes to the build site managers and prepared ourselves for later nostalgia- taking pictures with everyone we had gotten to know throughout our stay, I couldn’t help but feel something extraordinary was ending. From the new friendships I acquired during the week to strengthening the friendships with my team members from before, this trip became significant to me not only for the helpful contributions we made to the build site in Skopje but for truly being a “trip of friendship” as I bonded with many bright, caring people. We went to Skopje not knowing what to expect, but came back with hearts full of compassion, minds full of memories of the city, friends, and each others personal contributions to the build site, and, most importantly, sore muscles letting us know it was a job well done.



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