

Sophia Baraban's once-in-a-lifetime community service trip to Ecuador

From June 25 to July 3, junior Sophia Baraban traveled to Ecuador for the purpose of completing community service projects that would make the country a better place. Although the trip took her far from home, the experience was unforgettable as she helped build a school.

Q: Why did you go to Ecuador for a service trip?

A: Making a difference for others is important to me. When I heard about the Ecuador service trip, I was intrigued by the opportunity to help others in a Spanish-speaking country. While I was nervous about a trip that would take me so far from home without my parents, I was excited for the adventure. I knew it would give me perspective. Our service project focused on helping a village in the Amazon Rainforest with building a school, and I hoped that our work would help members of the village accomplish their dreams. I knew that it would be a once-in-a-lifetime experience.

Q: Who was the service project benefiting?

A: The service project was through Me to We and benefited a village on the banks of the Río Napo in the Amazon Rainforest. When my service group arrived, we learned that the village did not have a 12th grade classroom, meaning that 12th grade students that lived in the village had to go to another school by boat or foot just to finish high school and many of them chose not to. My service group helped lay the foundation of the 12th grade classroom, which ultimately will allow them to finish school in their own village. In addition, we also made

a walkway that will help all students get to each schoolroom.

Q: What types of activities did you participate in?

A: During my stay in Ecuador, every day was a new adventure. On the first day, I visited with locals in the cloud forest of Yunguilla, went to the Equator Line, and went shopping at a market in Quito. The second day consisted of a nine-hour drive and a 30-minute boat ride to the Amazon Rainforest. During the majority of the trip, my service group and I worked at the local village. Our work consisted of taking a boat to an island, fillings bags with sand, loading the boat, carrying the sandbags up a steep hill to the village, then mixing concrete, and pouring it. It was all very tiring, but so rewarding in the end. In the evenings, I would participate in bonding activities and go on night hikes in the Amazon with my groupmates. After we left the Amazon, we went to a town called Baños. There, we got to hike to a waterfall, relax in hot springs, and even swing off of a volcano. On the final day, we went to a famous market in Ecuador, Plaza de los Ponchos, in Otavalo.

Q: How was it leaving Ecuador?

A: Leaving Ecuador was bittersweet. I missed my home and my parents a lot, but I had also formed close bonds with people on the trip. The trip ended up being the most incredible experience I have ever had. I made lifelong friendships, and as cliché as it sounds, I truly came back a changed person. I have heard just about everyone complain that they don't like school, but I've come back knowing that I cannot complain because there are so many people in this world that don't have the same educational opportunities as we do. If you ever get the chance to make a difference in this world, to give someone a better life, take it, even if it's scary. It will be the

best thing you will ever do, I promise.