

Soon after I left my home in Denver, Colorado to begin my year as a Dominican Volunteer in Atlanta, Georgia, I realized I'd crossed a line. Actually, I realized I had crossed many lines- state lines, for one, but also the line from college to the "real world," childhood to adulthood, familiarity to unfamiliarity. When I boarded that plane heading south, I was going many places I'd never been before, trusting that God would light my way as I stepped into the unknown. It was a feeling of anxious excitement; not knowing what to expect but expecting to be surprised and even awed by God's plans for me. Now that I have completed this year, I can confidently say that the last ten months have not been a disappointment. The leap of faith I took when I embarked on this experience has blessed me in unimaginable ways. Being a Dominican Volunteer has been an adventure and a journey, but above all a testament of God's glory and faithfulness.

In Atlanta I worked at the International Community School, which is a public charter school focused on meeting the needs of Atlanta's large refugee population. The school has grades K-6, with a student body of a little over 300. Approximately half of the children are refugees or from refugee/immigrant families, while the other half are American. Students at ICS represent 35 different countries and speak 40 different languages. Needless to say, the school is as diverse as its name would have one imagine.



Before I came to ICS, so much of the world seemed far from me. I live day to day hearing news of atrocities in Iraq, I have a vague memory from childhood watching news about the war that took place in Bosnia in the '90s, and newspapers regularly report genocide, civil war, political turmoil in so many African countries. Here in the United States, where I lead a normal and what I consider privileged life, it is hard for me to understand the actuality of living under such dire conditions. But coming to ICS, working alongside staff, children, and families that have lived through real nightmares has brought me to a completely new level of awareness. Being immersed in ICS's diversity also allowed me to appreciate and learn about the richness of different cultures.

My position at the school was 2nd grade teacher's assistant for a class of 18 kids. I also worked in the after-school program, where I was a leader for my own group of children. Daily duties were helping the kids with classwork, reading to them, watching them and playing at recess, and making sure they stayed out of trouble! I had worked with kids before coming to ICS, but never in this capacity- I was with my little ones from 8-5 every day! It wasn't long before I began to feel more like a mother of 18 than a teacher's assistant.

Nevertheless, spending every day with children and learning about their world was beautiful and a gift in so many ways. Working with kids on an educational level, I didn't expect that I would get to know the kids as well as I did. But as the year progressed, I started to see the relationships that I was developing with my students. They would often come up to my desk and talk to me about things that they were excited about, as well as worries or questions they had. We also had a lot of great times together being silly and having fun on the playground. I quickly learned that children are so generous with themselves; everything they are just spills out of them. God creates each child so wonderfully, and gives them an authenticity all their own.

Some days were definitely tiring and a struggle, days when all I wanted was "peace and quiet," or days when I wished I had more wisdom to handle some of the situations I was in. Being an authority figure and having to discipline the kids was the most challenging for me, mostly because it was uncharted territory. Other times, just having to manage the kids and keep them in order was a task. I really had to step up to God's call for me to be a leader and show my kids how to be responsible and kind. During times of difficulty, it was sometimes hard to have the faith I needed, but God always pulled me through. Assurance from my community, a drawing from one of my kids, and the kindness of other teachers and staff always seemed to pick me up with perfect timing.

Looking back on my experience as a Dominican Volunteer, I see only brightness and color. I remember my first day at ICS and how oblivious I was to how much my time there would come to mean to me. At ICS, God filled my life with the laughter of children and showed me a vision of our interconnectedness as humans. Strangers and children much younger than me became unexpected friends and kindred spirits, providing the light I believed God would send. I may have been unsure about the choice I had made to live in a place I'd never been, with people I'd never met, and do a job I'd never done, but I learned that when you take a leap with the desire to serve, God helps you keep the faith.