

Charmed School
Learning English creates
job opportunities later in
life for Costa Rican kids.

The Virtuous Vacation

For two work-filled weeks we volunteered at a Costa Rican school—and in trying to teach the kids, we learned even more about ourselves

* My wife, Karen, and I stand sweating in a stuffy classroom, ready to help teach English. We're in Costa Rica on a volunteer vacation through Cross Cultural Solutions (CCS), a nonprofit working in 12 countries. Giggling third graders fidget behind long desks, but there's no sign of the teacher we're here to assist. Karen and I assume we'll be English aides: the Ed and Doc to the teacher's Carson, showing off our mastery of the language. And we're happy to do it! Coming here makes us good people! I'm sure the kids can feel our do-gooder glow.

I stand by the room's open door and glance outside: a warm breeze blows palm trees and fruit trees and thick grass. Viria Solis, CCS's program director, introduces us to the students, and it's then we make a gut-churning discovery. We're not here to assist a teacher. We *are* the teachers. Me and Karen. Two amateur educators with zero experience whose Spanish is *no bueno*. The kids pull pencils and paper from their backpacks, eagerly awaiting their first lesson, and I'm struck by a terrifying epiphany: that what seems like a good idea when you're feeling noble at home in

your La-Z-Boy is much more daunting when you're neck-deep in a different culture and you realize you've never taught anyone anything and now you'll be teaching English to kids *who don't speak English*.

Not only are we here by choice, but we've paid almost \$2,500 each for the privilege. We're among the many Americans who are trading sightseeing for service, and immersing themselves in a country and its people. "Most people who come here never see the real country," says Jose Ugalde, CCS's country director. "They arrive, they get on an air-conditioned bus, they go to an air-conditioned resort."

Not us. We will sweat like locals, eat like locals, and—the big goal—try to do something meaningful.

Why people decide to spend their precious free time volunteering in muggy Central America is a frequent conversation starter at the dormlike CCS home base. That's because a volunteer vacation is not your

usual let's-call-room-service type of trip. Karen and I are sleeping on bunk beds in a closet-size room, washing our dishes after meals, waiting in line to use bathrooms, even forgoing an evening beer (alcohol is forbidden—CCS doesn't want its image tarnished by drunken volunteers). So everyone has a backstory. Cherie, a Spanish teacher from New Jersey, is here because she just turned 40. "It was the antidote to self-pity," she says. Peter, 47, recently left the London bank where he'd worked for 28 years. "I wanted to confront myself about what matters to me in life," says Peter, who's volunteering for 12 weeks. "You only know about yourself when you face the unknown." It's a common theme among many older volunteers. The college kids are here because they're idealistic and earnest; the boomer types are examining their lives.

I'm here because my father died almost a year earlier, a heart attack stealing his life on the golf course. →

I'm here because I've been generously granted a sabbatical from my employer, and I feel I should do something significant with the time.

Mainly, though, I'm here because Karen and I don't have children of our own. And the older I get, the more it seems it will never happen. That I will never hold a son, never comfort a daughter, never hear the word *Dad*. And it eats at me.

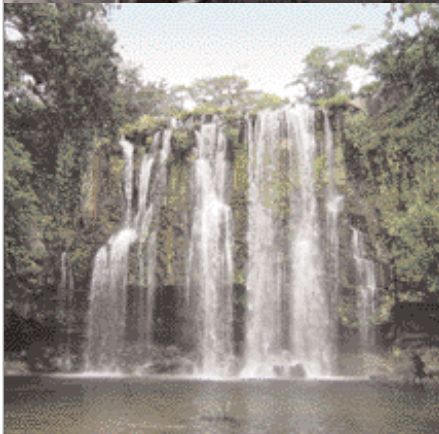
I've told Karen it's not too late for us. We'll adopt. I say we're cheating ourselves out of the central experience in life. "I just don't have maternal feelings," she says one night, and I have no response.

She feels guilty. We both feel selfish. But I love this woman, deeply. She's a nurse practitioner who has worked in pediatrics, and I can't help but wonder: Has she heard too many screaming kids? Has she seen too many children hurting and sick?

I don't know the answer. But I need a cure of my own, and I finally decide: the best option, perhaps the only option, is to try and help someone else's child. And, now, in the first small test of this grand notion, we write our names in large letters on the chalkboard, and students gaze at us with tiny, curious eyes.

Aside from feeling grossly underqualified for the job, here's my other concern: is it possible to make a difference in anyone's life in two meager weeks? CCS maintains you make a difference just by showing up. In poorer parts of the world, parents are more likely to send kids to school—instead of to work—because foreign volunteers give a school cachet.

I'm not sure how much cachet we're bringing to Escuela Cuestilla. After two days—we teach three classes in the morning and develop lesson plans in the afternoon—we're desperate for ideas. Help arrives from teacher and fellow volunteer Cherie, who suggests a variety-show approach. "Make things active and funny," she says. "Sing songs. Give them cards with words on them, and



Work Perks Volunteering offers a unique, nontouristy view of local people and sites, as Darlene Grieger, 80, bottom right, finds when she makes a new friend.

have them put the card on the object."

So we crank up the entertainment factor in our lessons. I do flash cards with the kids, making a huge production when they're right: applauding, sighing, oohing, aahing. We're now the Martin and Lewis of educators. We give them puzzles—Karen creates a terrific word search—and hold a rousing game of bingo that fills the room with squealing kids.

"Twenty-seven!" I shout, strutting before the blackboard, doing my best Groucho walk. "Who has a 27!"

The raucous room erupts in noise, then grows silent as the kids wait for the next number.

We may be getting the hang of this.

I fall in love with the kids. Karen does, too. Many of the children come from single-parent families—the fathers are often gone, some working nomadic farm jobs, some on drugs—and I'm warned that kids may call me

papa. That never happens, though a boy named Jose hangs on to me constantly. It's a little disconcerting. He also likes to pretend he's a dog. I'm talking with the principal one day, and Jose is behind me, arms around my stomach, barking into my back. The principal keeps chatting. I assume this is normal.

An always smiling little girl, Anabeth, becomes one of our favorites. Karen and I had written some numbers on the board, and Anabeth asks me how old I am, one of the few sentences I can quickly translate. I groan and whisper it. She giggles, shakes her head no, and points at "30." Smart kid.

Many of the kids ask if Karen is *mi esposa*—my wife. I always say yes, sigh dreamily, give them a look like Ryan O'Neal in *Love Story*. One day, after class finishes, Anabeth asks me in Spanish if Karen and I have children.

No, I tell her. I force a smile.

Anabeth says that if we ever have

children, and we have a girl, we could name her Anabeth.

I'm surprised by how comfortable we feel after only one week. Our biggest challenge now is the hyper-energetic first-grade class. Unlike the older kids, who are all business—when a few fourth-grade boys get too loud, one girl yells, “*Silencio!*”—the first graders zoom around the room, screaming and jumping on furniture. So we sing songs that make them use their high-octane little bodies, starting

older students stand outside the windows of our room to watch. As for our energy-burning efforts, they're successful. Karen and I are exhausted.

Weekends are volunteers' big chance to leave town and see the country, so we travel with nine others to Monteverde, an isolated mountain town. The highlight is zip lining—whizzing Spider-Man-like down cables at speeds approaching 45 mph, soaring over misty rain forest trees—though it's not nearly as wild as the



Class Actions For the writer, top left, the hard work of teaching was balanced by fun times playing ticktacktoe and soccer with the children during breaks.

with “Head, Shoulders, Knees, and Toes,” an English ditty they all know. As you sing, you touch the body part mentioned in the song. We stand in a circle, and each time we sing the song we speed it up, ultimately to ridiculous proportions. It's so hilarious it increases their energy levels.

Karen and I now unveil a new tune to Escuela Cuestilla: “The Hokey Pokey.” We put our right hands in, we take our right hands out; we put our right hands in, and we shake them all about. We also do feet, elbows, chins, hips, and—the ultimate in first-grade comedy—bumps! As we're hokeying and pokeying, a group of bemused

bumpy ride on crater-filled roads to Monteverde itself. Imagine a four-hour earthquake on wheels.

Given the quakelike nature of the entire two weeks, I ask Karen if she'd do it again. We agree it's more work than we expected, but I'm sure—once we recover—we'll make a second volunteer plunge. We've never experienced a foreign place on such an intimate level, both through CCS's cultural programs—history lessons, local rice-and-bean meals—and the connections we make with the kids.

Our most touching moment comes on our last day, at an outdoor assembly. Alexander, a sweet, pudgy kid

Signing Up

Three of the most established volunteer groups:

→ **Cross Cultural Solutions** works in 12 nations (800-380-4777; www.crossculturalsolutions.org)

→ **Global Volunteers** has programs in the United States and 18 other countries (800-487-1074; www.globalvolunteers.org)

→ **Habitat for Humanity** sends teams around the world through its Global Village Program (800-422-4828; www.habitat.org)

who could star in a Costa Rican version of *The Little Rascals*, hoists the national flag up a pole. Some kids present a science project, the principal makes a speech. Karen nudges me. “I think he's talking about us,” she says.

The principal calls us up to the porchlike area in front of our classroom. One of the girls hands Karen a small gift wrapped in tissue, and Johan, a smart kid and first-rate soccer player, hands one to me. It's a key chain with photos: on one side is the school; on the other, a picture of Karen and me with some of the kids. They all applaud. Karen wipes a tear.

When the van arrives to pick us up, we are engulfed by smiling kids. There are kisses, handshakes, hugs.

The van rumbles down the gravel road, the waving hands behind us grow small. Back home, Karen and I will again discuss children. Little will change. But we have become closer, she and I. We've seen each other play and work in a new way. Summer at the school, I find, has created a touch of spring in my heart. Seeing the joy in those kids, I've come to believe in possibilities. We were in Costa Rica trying to give, but we have been given much more, and for that we say *gracias*. ■

Ken Budd is a features editor for AARP THE MAGAZINE.

➔ See a volunteering-in-Costa Rica slide show at www.aarpmagazine.org/travel.