

Faith fuels siblings' desire to give back to others

By Patrick Sedeno
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It's been five years since Emily Patton traveled to Central America as a youth missionary for the Diocese of Dallas, but the lessons of faith she learned there continue to pay dividends not only for her, but for other members of her family.

In 2014, as a member of the Ursuline Academy of Dallas team, she traveled to Nicaragua. She and her group stayed in a church in an area called Muelle de los Buques. They worked at two schools during the day, and interacted with the local children and with other Dallas youth missionaries from other schools.

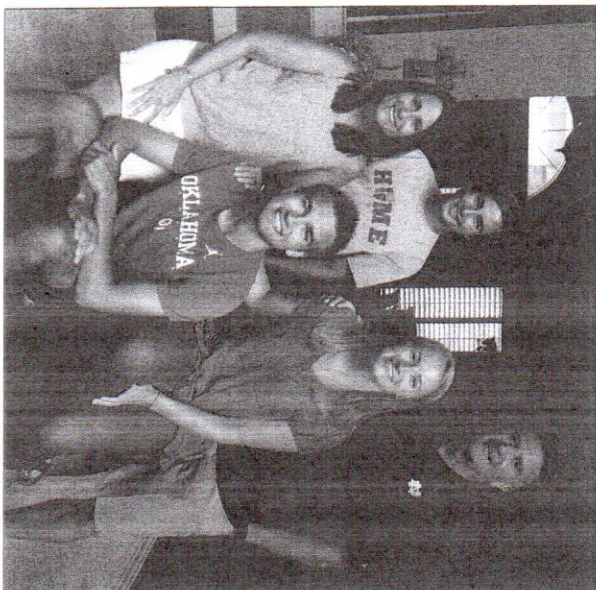
Today, Patton is a recent graduate of the University of Notre Dame who moved to Chicago in early July to begin working with Nielsen, an information and data company. But she remembers fondly that mission trip as a catalyst of her faith journey, one that began at home with her parents, Meg and Dave Ross.

Patton said the mission trip sparked her interest in Catholic social teaching and inspired her to participate in other mission trips while at Notre Dame. At Notre Dame, she volunteered at the Ronald McDonald House of Michigan, co-founded a university club to support it, and also served as a financial literacy mentor for high school students in South Bend, Indiana.

"The two main things that I took away from the trip and have carried with me since are to pause and to be grateful and to use what I have been blessed with to serve my community," she said. "My favorite memories are of the many days it rained in the afternoon and we would spring with the children out into the rain for a slippery game of soccer across the grass. They joy that these children carried with them in such simple things filled me up."

Sharing a servant's heart

She loved the mission trip so much that she talked and talked about



KEVIN PATTON/Special Contributor
Kevin Patton, standing, is shown with his brother Carter and sister Emily, along with their parents, Meg and Dave Ross, at their home in Allen on July 4. The three Patton siblings have participated in Diocese of Dallas mission trips to Nicaragua and Costa Rica over the past few years.

it when she got home and her two younger brothers, Carter and Kevin, have also been youth missionaries.

The Patton siblings are among dozens of families with multiple children who have made the commitment to serve in Central America, said Deacon Charlie Stump, the director of Pastoral Services for the Diocese of Dallas who initiated the youth mission trips.

"Each year many of the student missionaries follow in the footsteps of their siblings that have gone on a mission trip," Deacon Stump said. "When the students return to Dallas, they are animated to serve within their church and community as mission disciples. Parents tell me that their child's mission trip energized the family's faith experiences

and instability and violence in Honduras due to gang warfare over drugs prompted Deacon Stump to find alternate mission sites in Nicaragua and Costa Rica.

Although the sites have changed and more participating schools have been added, much has remained the same. After being selected, Dallas missionaries and their parents gather prior to the trip to get to know each other. Like missionaries, they take few clothes and only essentials with them. When they arrive at the site, they are separated into teams comprised of students from different schools. Most electronics are banned.

The mornings start off with prayer, breakfast and work at different sites, where the missionaries interact with and work alongside craftsmen, make bracelets and play soccer with the children, and eat lunch usually prepared by locals. After they return to their base, they take a shower (usually cold), journal, eat dinner and then sit in a circle and talk about how they encountered Christ that day.

Throughout the week their relationships with the local people increases and the bond among themselves gets stronger. They are more open to discussing their faith and encounters during the circle time, and most, if not all, talk about taking their lives back in the United States for granted, and are amazed about the great happiness and faith of the local people who have so little in terms of housing and educational and financial opportunities.

The final day is an emotional one. The Dallas missionaries traditionally leave string friendship bracelets, a cross, or other personal items with someone they have grown close to. They also leave behind their work shoes, mostly sneakers, in a pile. The shoes will later be distributed to those in need.

After his sister Emily Patton talked about the trip, Carter, a student at John Paul II High School, applied and became a member of the youth mission trip to Nicaragua in 2017.

"She had such a great experience and I wanted to have a similar experience," he said. "The largest impact that the trip had on my day-to-day life is mainly a recognition of the privilege that I have. My eyes were really opened with how much God has blessed me and it really made me a better person."

He said that the lessons of building community that he learned in Nicaragua will serve him well next fall when he begins his role as a resident advisor at the University of Oklahoma.

A few weeks ago, Kevin Patton, a rising senior at John Paul II High School, followed in his siblings' footsteps and traveled to Costa Rica on the mission trip, where he helped with repairs and renovations at a church.

"I remember how when they would come back from their trips each one had enjoyed and treasured it in so many different ways and I always wanted the chance to experience it for myself," he said. "I played soccer with the little kids until they realized that I could do a front hand-spring, which they thought was way cooler than the soccer ball."

Importance of service

Meg Ross, the Patton siblings' mother, said that the mission trip was an extension of what she and her husband have taught at home: to serve. She said the trip had a profound impact on her daughter and that her boys saw that.

"I've tried very hard to teach my children the importance of service," she said. "We have had our own challenges in life, as most families have, but we have also been incredibly blessed. It is my belief that it is our responsibility, not only as good Catholics, but also as good people to give our time in service to the community."

"I am thankful that the diocese has provided these opportunities for my children and it is clear to me that they have made a huge impact on their lives," Ross said.