

THE DENVER POST

Teen voluntourism with Colorado companies a life-changer July 26, 2013

By Chryss Cada
Special to The Denver Post

Teens go abroad on service trips expecting to learn about the foreign culture they are visiting. What they don't anticipate is how much they will also learn about their own country — and themselves.

"Living in the United States, there are so many things you take for granted, basic things like roads, running water and a place to go to school," said William Loyd, who worked on a school in Costa Rica the summer before his senior year at Boulder High. "A child walks up to you looking so grateful just for the opportunity to get an education, and you realize how incredibly fortunate we are."

Loyd said his 2007 trip through Denver-based Walking Tree Travel "planted a seed" in him for public service.

"The trip showed me that I only wanted to do work that was meaningful and fulfilling to me and that helped the community at large," said Loyd, who went on to study political science at the University of Oregon.

Sofia Rainaldi noticed a similar change in herself after a trip with the African School Assistance Program got the desire to help others "under her skin."
"My time in Tanzania has changed how I see the world and how I want to lead my life," she said. "I think this program creates a new awareness in the kids that take advantage of it, and creates global citizens."

Loyd and Rainaldi are a part of a growing number of teens who don't spend their summer vacations on road trips or at theme parks — they immerse themselves in the culture by working for and with the people in the foreign countries they visit.

This type of travel is at home in Colorado, with three of the major companies providing service trips for teens based here.

The seed for Walking Tree Travel was planted when its three founders were teens themselves. Luke Mueller, Paul Laurie and Gabriel Duncan met at Denver's East High School.



Sofia Rainaldi, left, and Sarah Bachar made new friends in Tanzania with the Africa Schools Assistance Project. IPTC: Sofia Rainaldi, left, and Sarah Bachar made new friends in Tanzania with the Africa Schools Assistance Project. (Provided by Africa Schools Assistance Project)

"We all traveled after high school and realized that Americans travel in a much different way than the rest of the world, going on cookie-cutter tours and staying at generic hotels," Laurie said in a phone interview from Montreal. "Our idea was that Americans would benefit themselves and the communities they visited if they were more involved with the people in those communities."

And so 15 years after they met in high school, the trio came up with trips to get people more involved. Walking Tree is a summer Peace Corps-like program for teens that works in countries from China to Costa Rica, Senegal to Spain. Annually, they send hundreds of teens to small villages to build schools, learn about local culture and explore a world outside of the United States.

"The term 'life-changing' is used a lot, but in the case of these trips it absolutely fits," Laurie said. "Students come back more patient, more open-minded and with a new view of their role in their communities and in the world at large."

Barb Vits, a Spanish teacher at Ralston Valley High School, had been taking students overseas on more traditional trips for years before she heard about Walking Tree. During her first trip with the company in 2000, she took a group of students to Costa Rica to help build a community room onto a school.

"The change in the kids was incredible," she said. "At first they asked me 'What do we do?' Then they were in there mixing cement and doing it all themselves." Portia Hinshaw saw a dramatic transformation after her son Jhamal Fanning went on a trip with Boulder-based Global Works before his junior year of high school.

"When Jhamal came back from his three-week Ecuador trip, we were greeted by a very different young man," the Boulder resident said. "He was more independent; he was more at ease with himself, and overall he felt more responsible. Having the opportunity to travel in another country and to be put in situations that were not always easy brought out the best in him."

Fritz Moriarty, Global Works' director of enrollment, describes the type of students who go on their trips.

"They are ... open-minded young people who want to see another part of the world and have the curiosity to leave their home town and go out into the world," he said. "They have at least some degree of empathy developed already, but they have never done anything like this before."

The company was a more traditional tour company for about 14 years before Hurricane Hugo struck Puerto Rico in 1989.

"The founders of the company saw what was happening there and wanted to help," Moriarty said. "That's where the concept of service work travel began."

Popular teen programs

Judging by the number of students (roughly 900) who sign on with the group each year, it's a popular type of travel. About half of Global Works' clients go with small custom groups, and the others are in cultural exchange, language immersion or focus programs (for students interested in a particular area of study, such as medicine). All programs include a public-service element. For example, a focus program on public health conducted educational outreach about how to properly brush teeth.

"They (the students) are challenged in ways they haven't been before," Moriarty said. "They find themselves in different cultural scenarios; they deal with the anxiety that brings and overcome it — and that builds a lot of character."

Emma Roberts knows how easy it is to get caught up in the everyday frenzy that is being a teen in the United States — because she is one.

But when the Colorado teen traveled to Tanzania with the African School Assistance Project for the first time, she saw a world that dwarfed all the trials and tribulations at home.

"As a high school student, it is so easy to get caught up in the day-to-day problems of grades, homework and friends, that we sometimes forget about the rest of the world, and about how fortunate we truly are," Roberts wrote in an e-mail while working on a school in Tanzania in June. "ASAP completely changed my perspective both on my life and on the world as a whole. American students are going to define the future of this country, and it is crucial that our future leaders have a global perspective."

ASAP was formed in 2008 when a group of 14 people from Colorado raised money to build a school in the village of Mbasseny in the rural northeast corner of Tanzania. Since then the organization has built two primary schools and expanded a secondary school so that more than 800 children can now attend.

"There is a saying here, 'bega kwa bega' (shoulder-to-shoulder in Swahili), and that is how we work with the villagers so that they will have pride in the school long after we leave,"

said Susan Bachar, a founder of ASAP and now the group's executive director. Students give more than just sweat equity, as they are responsible for raising \$1,500 to contribute to the project.

"Volunteers tell me they are surprised by how little money it takes to change the lives of people in the developing world, and by how much Americans have in common with the citizens of Africa," Bachar said. "But probably the most powerful message I hear is that volunteers leave Tanzania feeling empowered to help make a difference in the world because now they know they can."

This summer was Roberts' second trip with the group.

"After my first trip with ASAP, I knew that I wanted to come back, simply because I didn't feel like my experience was finished," she said. "My time volunteering in Africa changed me and I couldn't stay away."

OutWest columnist Chryss Cada is a freelance writer and adjunct journalism professor at Colorado State University. Visit her at chryss.com.