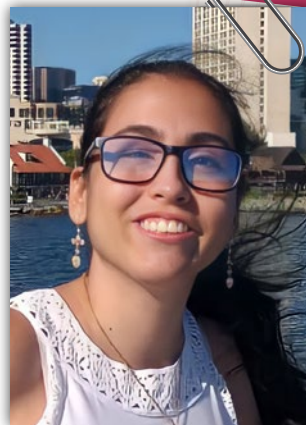


Through the Youth Ambassadors Program, the Sky's the Limit!

This visually impaired woman from Colombia volunteered in San Francisco and learned about service projects during a three week program in the United States, all before graduating high school.



Sara Giraldo's penchant for service started well before she participated in the U.S Department of State's Bureau of Educational and Cultural Affairs (ECA) sponsored Youth Ambassadors Program at the age of 18. For three years, she had volunteered with the local YMCA in her home city of Armenia in Colombia. Her passion for international culture went back at least as far. At the age of 14, she started studying English at the Colombo Americano, a local center dedicated to the promotion of English and U.S. culture.

She first learned about ECA's Youth Ambassadors Program from the EducationUSA advising center, located in the Colombo Americano. EducationUSA is a network of over 400 advising centers worldwide, which provides international students with the information and resources to access professional and academic development in the United States. Excited for the opportunity, she promptly submitted her application, yet that was not to be her year.

Ever persistent, she re-applied the following year and was accepted into the 2018 cohort of students from Colombia and Ecuador, who would be spending the next three weeks volunteering and learning about service projects in the United States. Upon returning to their home country, they would be responsible for carrying out a service project of their very own in their local community.

The program was arranged in three phases. They spent the first week engaged in volunteer work in San Francisco. They served meals at St. Antony's Foundation and looked after children between ages six and ten at a Boys And Girls Club. They also volunteered at local high schools sharing about their cultures.

Sara and her peers spent the second week in Wisconsin experiencing American life with a host family and taking classes in community service. That week was also spent putting together the plan for their service projects which they would carry out after returning home.

Sara really enjoyed spending time with her host family, who lived on a farm in the country. Upon her arrival at their home, she brought them some coffee and lechona, a Colombian cultural staple. Her host family also shared American coffee with her. Her favorite activity was riding her American family's horses.

Students spent weekday mornings in their classes, where they learned about setting goals, planning objectives, measuring outcomes, identifying target communities, and narrowing down their initiatives.

They spent the last week in Washington DC, taking in the sights, and learning about American culture and history.



“I feel like in Colombia they need to have more people concerned about volunteering, and it is not very popular there. I was surprised to see so many people doing it in the United States.”

In order to prepare a plan for reasonable accommodations, staff of World Learning and Amigos de las Americas organized a phone call with Sara. Since she was the first blind person that they had worked with on the Youth Ambassadors Program, they wanted to make sure that they were prepared.

Yet there was little need for concern. Sara was able to get a great deal of support from fellow Colombian and Ecuadorian students, who were accustomed to assisting where needed. The children with whom she volunteered also had questions about her eyesight, which she easily answered.

She had never volunteered with people who didn't know her at all. She was worried about how people would react. Wouldn't she just get in the way? But she realized that while there were things that she couldn't do such as sealing the food packages,, there were also things that she could do such as packing the rice and veggies. So she sought out and volunteered in ways that she could contribute.

When she returned home, Sara joined forces with the local YMCA to organize her community project called Blind Mind, a three-month program designed to increase disability awareness in children ages six to ten. Meeting weekly with her group of children, she shared about disabilities from her experience and through documentaries. She also found a soccer ball with bells in it, and showed the children how blind people could play soccer.

At the end of the year, she and all of the other youth ambassador participants were invited to Bogota to present on the actions and outcomes of their projects.

After ECA's Youth Ambassadors Program, Sara went on to take classes in modern languages, special education, and child development at the University of Quindío. She spent a year at Mesa Community College in Arizona as a participant in the U.S. Department of State sponsored Community College Initiative Program, which provides scholarships for individuals from select countries to spend up to one academic year of non-degree study at a United States community college. She may pursue a career in international development or education, or she might do something in the area of special education. At this point in time, the sky's the limit! ■