



From left to right: Bethany and Giada DeCola, Melissa and Henry Jurgens, Mia and Katie Marchetti, Chase, Susan and Cooper Zidlicky, and Jackson and Brooke Drumheller



Light of Love Ministries visited El Salvador and Kenya earlier this year.



Light of Love

Riversiders learn life lessons from mission trips to El Salvador and Kenya

By Elizabeth Kos

It can be so hard to find joy these days, but some families from Riverside have traveled across the world and discovered just that. They found this joy not in a museum, a five-star hotel or a pristine Mediterranean beach, but in the slums of Kenya and El Salvador. And after experiencing this tremendous joy and strong sense of community, all these mother-and-child pairs cannot wait to return.

Light of Love Ministry is a new non-profit organization founded by Riverside resident Susan Zidlicky in 2022. Its mission is to be a bridge to give people opportunities to go and serve abroad. An avid traveler and faithful servant, Zidlicky has journeyed to Nicaragua, Honduras, Uganda, Egypt and Jordan, in

addition to her trips to El Salvador and Kenya.

“These trips are not about the work, though we do work hard,” she said. “They are all about the people we meet and the connections we make.”

Zidlicky believes that it’s important for kids and adults alike to really connect with the people they are helping. The work performed on the trips is what gets people to sign up for their first trip, but the bonds they form while working and laughing alongside those they are helping are what make them sign up to go again and again.

“You can watch the news to hear about what’s going on around the world, but when you lean in and get to know a family, you learn that poverty doesn’t mean misery, and

we have so much to more to learn from them than we can ever give,” Zidlicky said.

Henry Jurgens was an eighth-grader at Hauser Junior High when he went to El Salvador with his mother Melissa Jurgens this past spring. He had no idea what to expect on this trip, and was surprised by how grateful everyone he met was.

“It’s hard to find joy, and it was abundant there,” he said. “They had really nothing, but were so supportive of each other.”

Henry was also surprised at the connections he made. One of the reasons he wants to go back is to see the people he met again.

“Connections are such a big part of it, and I keep up with people over Facebook,” he said.

Melissa added that she loved “how strong

the sense of community was together, despite their really challenging circumstances.”

“We were building a house, and the whole community came together to help take materials off the truck, digging holes, doing all the things to help this one family in their community,” she said.

Both mother and son agreed that the community was genuinely happy and excited for the blessing this family received.

“I got a lot more than I gave,” Melissa said.

One of her favorite memories was feeding the homeless on the streets of San Salvador one night. She said she was “literally hanging off the back of a pickup truck, and handing out meals to people.”

“[It] was way out of my comfort-zone, but really cool,” she said.

Zidlicky said that pushing yourself outside of your normal routine is one of the main reasons to go on a trip with Light of Love.

“We never realize how strong and brave we are or how much of an impact we can have until we step out of our comfort-zone and into the unknown,” she said.

Six pairs of mother and son teams were on the El Salvador trip from Hounds Baseball out of Burr Ridge. Zidlicky’s son Cooper had so much fun connecting with his teammates on this incredible adventure. Not only were they

building a house, passing out food baskets and taking kids from an orphanage on a field-trip, but they were also passing on their love of baseball to kids their own age.

“It was all about having a great time with my teammates, and connecting with kids from another country over a game we love,” he said.

Katie and Mia Marchetti of Riverside also experienced this strong sense of community on their Kenya trip.

“I think my best moment was when we met the kids from the orphanage day one, and they just clicked with our kids,” Katie said. “It was an immediate holding hands, hugging. It was amazing how quickly they just adjusted to one another.”

Her daughter Mia built strong connections with kids her own age over a campfire they had one night.

“[It] was one of my favorite events, because I felt connected to the kids, and it brought everyone together,” she said.

The pair also visited the Mathare slums, where approximately 500,000 people are living in extreme poverty. They gave 900 food baskets containing three weeks’ worth of food to families from the three schools there, and visited and prayed with a family living in Mathare.

“These people are so overjoyed that someone would travel all that way to them to bring them love and show that people care,” Zidlicky said. “Oftentimes, they can’t believe that someone was willing to leave their families to come help them in their part of the world. We are so privileged in so many ways here, and until we break through that bubble and experience how so many people live in the rest of the world, we just cannot appreciate how blessed we are.”

Zidlicky knows that there are plenty of people here that need help, too, but she feels called to these other countries so people can experience a whole new culture.

“There are so many people in need all over the world,” she said. “I think it’s important for people to experience this need first-hand, and see how people live full and happy lives without any of the luxuries we have.”

Her son Chase, a sophomore at Nazareth Academy, added that people “see happiness in a different way” in other countries.

“We think that money and things make us happy,” he said, “[but they] recognize that experiences, talking and doing things you might like with loved ones, are what’s most important.”

Jackson Drumheller, a junior at Riverside-

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Six pairs of mothers and sons from the Hounds Baseball travel program attended the El Salvador trip.

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Brookfield High School, returned from his trip to Kenya with new family.

“I wanted to meet my pen-pal that I had been writing to for a while,” he said. “Now there’s a personal connection there. Before, I was just going to help out, but now I know these people personally, and they know you and have become family in a way.”

His mother Brooke Drumheller agreed.

“I’ve totally fallen in love with some of these people that I still stay in touch with,” she said. “I feel like I need to go back and see their faces again.”

Jackson said that he did not expect everyone to be so positive.

“No matter what they were going through, they were always positive and kind to everyone they met,” he said.

Giada DeCola, who went to Kenya as an eighth-grader at Hauser, also noticed how genuinely joyful everyone they met was.

“They were living on the streets, but would always wave and smile when they would see us,” she said. “I think it changed my perspective, because here, [there are] all the small things we worry about that don’t



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— Susan Zidlicky

really matter that we add value to, but there, they only care about big, important things. It’s a life-changing experience, and it really makes you realize how much you have and how much you should be grateful for.”

“I saw a light in Giada that I knew was there, but it really just opened her eyes. She smiled the entire time she was there,” Giada’s mother Bethany DeCola said.

Though she had reservations about leaving the rest of her family and traveling



to a place she wasn’t familiar with, Bethany is so grateful that she took the time to go with her daughter on this trip.

“It’s something that we did together that will always be a memory for us,” she said.

When asked what advice these missionaries had for people that are thinking about taking a trip, Brooke Drumheller said, “Get signed up.”

You can sign up to participate in a mission trip or help support a group by visiting www.lightofloveministry.org. ♦