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Fearless Friday: Elena Perez-Zetune

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Fearless Friday: Elena Perez-Zetune

Abstract
Consistently involved in programs and initiatives addressing social issues related to children, migrant communities, and education, Elena Perez-Zetune ’14 fearlessly allows her assumptions to be challenged, her time given in service, and her energy spent on encouraging younger generations.

Elena has served with several different programs on campus run by the Center for Public Service, such as El Centro, Immersion Projects, Heston Internships, Casa de la Cultura, and the LIU Migrant Education Program. Growing up in Gettysburg, Elena has had the unique opportunity to run and organize some of the same programs she participated in as a child, and has been able to learn from both sides of the experience.

Keywords
Surge, Surge Gettysburg, Gettysburg College, Center for Public Service, children, social issues, education, immigrant, migrant services

Disciplines
Civic and Community Engagement | Educational Sociology | Inequality and Stratification | Race and Ethnicity | Sociology

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Surge is a student blog at Gettysburg College where systemic issues of justice matter. Posts are originally published at surgegettysburg.wordpress.com Through stories and reflection, these blog entries relate personal experiences to larger issues of equity, demonstrating that –isms are structural problems, not actions defined by individual prejudice. We intend to popularize justice, helping each other to recognize our biases and unlearn the untruths.

This blog post is available at The Cupola: Scholarship at Gettysburg College: http://cupola.gettysburg.edu/surge/13
Consistently involved in programs and initiatives addressing social issues related to children, migrant communities, and education, Elena Pérez-Zetune ’14 fearlessly allows her assumptions to be challenged, her time given in service, and her energy spent on encouraging younger generations.

Elena has served with several different programs on campus run by the Center for Public Service, such as El Centro, Immersion Projects, Heston Internships, Casa de la Cultura, and the LIU Migrant Education Program. Growing up in Gettysburg, Elena has had the unique opportunity to run and organize some of the same programs she participated in as a child, and has been able to learn from both sides of the experience.

“Right now I’m the Program Coordinator for Casa de la Cultura and run the Swimming Program,” says Elena. “I really love working with the kids in the program because my mom took me there to learn how to swim when I was seven or eight years old. The program used to be in the CUB because there used to be a pool there, and I just remember walking into the building and thinking about how big and exciting it was. It’s so cool to be able to have seen all the ways the program has changed and developed over the years.”

Elena’s participation in programs like Swimming, HeadStart, and El Centro (she started volunteering there in 2008) have helped shape her understanding of education, migrant experiences, and the value of extracurricular activities to help socialize and teach children. “I grew up benefitting from these programs—they’re really what formed my own educational experience. And I love that I’m able to get involved with the kids in the programs now.”

Elena is still involved in El Centro, the afterschool tutoring program for migrant children at Lincoln Elementary School, where she works as an intern. “I love doing El Centro because, really, I always learn so much more from
the kids than I could ever teach them. I’ve learned so much over the past six years about how to work with others, especially children.”

Elena’s experiences serving here in Gettysburg led her to pursue opportunities related to social justice issues internationally once she became a student at Gettysburg College. In only her first year or two at Gettysburg, Elena became a student leader on an Immersion Project trip to Nicaragua, went on another Immersion trip to the Dominican Republic, and also worked as a Heston Intern in Nicaragua the summer after her freshman year.

“When you go abroad, you learn so much about others and yourself. The programs I went on were all really different, but related to things I was learning here. When I went to the DR, we talked about race relations between Dominicans and Haitians, but also focused on music. Working in Nicaragua was a great experience, too, because I learned how to be flexible, build relationships, and also had the chance to see how their education system worked.

“In Nicaragua, I could also compare, despite all the differences, how differently the school program I worked with in Nicaragua ran as compared to El Centro here in Adams County. Here, the children in the program are Latino students who deal with issues related to being a child of color who is discriminated against in the system. I’ve seen the system and been through the public education system myself, so I know what they’re experiencing. There are sometimes economic and language barriers depending on the family situation, but still, they can get a good education. In Nicaragua, though, the kids faced different challenges where the school was huge with a lot of students in one classroom, sometimes they didn’t even have notebooks or pencils, and a lot of times the children in the program didn’t come from a stable home, were homeless, or were going from house to house. Seeing those differences was very eye-opening.”

Back in Gettysburg, Elena has remained involved with these different programs, serving as a camp counselor at two migrant student camps in Shippensburg last summer, one for middle school students, and one for high school students, through the LIU Migrant Education Program. “I learned two major things from that experience,” says Elena. “The first is that middle schoolers and high schoolers aren’t as scary as I’d thought they’d be. The second thing is that the migrant community in the area is changing demographically—which surprised me and challenged my assumptions.

“I’ve grown up in Adams County where everything is very agricultural with apple orchards and peach orchards and there are a lot of Mexican American communities. In my mind, growing up around here, I always thought of all ‘migrant communities’ as Mexican American since about 80% of the people in the programs were Latinos. At the migrant programs this summer, however, only 20% of the students were Latino. There were students from Nepal, Eastern Europe, Korea—I still don’t know why that is, but I think maybe the immigrant community is changing and shifting. This all relates back to my time in Nicaragua, too, where I learned that I couldn’t just assume I knew what the children in the school program were going through even though we spoke the same language, because we had come from very different countries and cultures.”
Through all of her experiences, both abroad and in Gettysburg, Elena has learned valuable lessons not just about herself and her perspective, but also the value of education. “Education is not just what you do in school,” says Elena, “it’s your extracurriculars, your activities—I think child development needs more than school. It needs things like physical involvement, doing fun things, socializing, and getting more involved with other kids.”

Through all of her work with social justice programs, Elena has come to adopt a greater understanding of education, migrant communities, and the power of influencing young children. Her passion and love for helping other people, challenging her own perspectives and assumptions, and taking risks make her an influential and noteworthy leader on campus.

http://surgegettysburg.wordpress.com/2014/03/07/fearless-friday-elena-perez-zetune/