

Purpose Beyond Borders: A Fijian Journey to Personal Growth

By Luisa LoFranco, University of Oregon

Last summer, Ella Durchin, a 21-year-old third-year journalism major at the University of Oregon, embarked on a unique and transformative volunteer trip to the island of Viti Levu in Fiji. With zero expectations and worry, Durchin's journey was filled with meaningful experiences while helping orphans and bringing the oasis back to public beaches through cleanups. She lived with host families, worked on various service projects, and connected with young volunteers worldwide. These experiences profoundly impacted the local community and transformed Durchin's perspective on life, which she brought back to The University of Oregon.

Durchin's program, known for its high community service involvement, presented new challenges daily. One of the initial tasks involved building chicken coops, which were essential for local families to sustain poultry farming and provide a steady source of food and income. However, it was her time spent at the local orphanage that truly touched Ella's heart. Ella and her team brought food supplies and spent quality time with the children, bringing joy and companionship to the orphans. In addition to these projects, Durchin participated in constructing homes for families in need. This task required a collaborative effort and manual labor, fostering a strong camaraderie among the volunteers while providing much-needed shelter for the community. Recognizing the importance of environmental conservation, the volunteers also engaged in regular cleanup drives, clearing debris from beaches and public spaces and promoting a cleaner and healthier environment for the residents.

Living with host families allowed Durchin to immerse herself fully in Fijian culture's vibrant tapestry. She experienced the heartwarming hospitality of the locals, learned about their rich customs and traditions, and even picked up some basic Fijian phrases, such as "Loloma levu Totoka," which translates to "lots of love and beauty." This cultural exchange was a significant aspect of her trip, enriching her understanding of the world and broadening her horizons.

"Just know I have never felt more love with people that did not have much because all they had was love," Durchin said.

Durchin's time in Fiji was a transformative period of personal growth, a journey that ignited a passion for service within her. She developed a deeper appreciation for different cultures, honed her communication and teamwork skills, and discovered a passion for service that she plans to integrate into her future journalism career. Durchin's story is a powerful testament to the impact one can make through selfless service and the power of cultural immersion in fostering global understanding.

"I felt as if I spent my entire life convincing myself that I knew what peace and beauty meant, as if I had known the beauty that lies within a community, but when I arrived in this third-world country – I realized that I have only seen a privileged glimpse of true beauty" Durchin explained.

Upon Durchins return to the University of Oregon, she has found numerous ways to integrate the lessons she learned in Fiji into her academic and extracurricular pursuits. Her experiences have shaped her approach to journalism work and her role in the university community. Durchin advocates for environmentally responsible practices on campus and throughout Eugene. Her growth in Fiji shaped her into the person she is today and how she carries her life in Eugene. Her dedication and hard work on various projects brought tangible benefits to the local community and left an indelible mark on her own life. Looking ahead, Durchins impacts will go beyond the barriers of a UO classroom.