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COURTESY OF CHANDNI PATEL Chandni Patel, pictured here ditch-digging in Llanos de Morales, Guatemala, took 10 weeks off this summer from her career as an information systems consultant to do volunteer social work.

EDISON - Chandni Patel recently took some time off from her career as an information systems consultant to give something back to the world community.

Patel, 24, toured Brazil, Peru and Guatemala doing volunteer and social work for 10 weeks.

"I had always wanted to do an international volunteering trip," Patel said. "I had wanted to do the Peace Corps or CARE [Cooperative for Assistance and Relief Everywhere], which is a one-year commitment, but when I graduated from college, I had an amazing offer from IBM. So instead, I made a promise to myself that at some point in my career, when I had a chunk of time available, I would go abroad and do social work."

Patel, a 10-year resident of Edison, got the opportunity to do so after applying for a three-month leave of absence from her job, something that is not often granted.

"It is really hard to be granted a leave of absence, and that is why I thought I might have to quit [my job] to do it," she said. "I was prepared to do that since I knew of two other co-workers who had

applied for a leave but did not receive one. So, I wrote a really nice proposal saying I wanted to do volunteer work, and outlining what I would do in Peru, Guatemala and Brazil."

"Given where I am in my life right now, I had the time to do this," she said, "and I didn't know if I would have the opportunity to do this later on."

A day-care center in Salvador, Brazil, was her first stop on the trip, which Patel calls a "once-in-a-lifetime" opportunity.

"There were 38 2- to 3-year-old kids at the day-care center, and they would have just two nannies taking care of all the kids," Patel said. "I was the first volunteer, so they were just so happy to see another helping hand."

Patel had prepared herself for different cultural norms.

"But when I got there, I found I was working with some kids who didn't have homes, and then other kids who didn't get much time to spend with their parents," she said. "The conditions were also such that they provided lunch and breakfast, but it was in such small portions [that] a lot of the kids would ask for more, but you couldn't give it [to them]."

Next was a four-week trip to the province of Ayacucho, Peru, where she volunteered in a soup kitchen and the equivalent of a home for senior citizens.

"I had been scheduled to [work] with a women's empowerment group, but we ran into some issues so they thought of an alternative for me - a soup kitchen," she said.

The soup kitchen turned out to be a simple small hut with two large stoves, but it served any local resident who needed a nourishing meal.

"The whole general area there is pretty much poverty-stricken, and [people] weren't getting three meals a day," Patel said. "Whoever came and paid a relatively small amount of money got a meal. There were a lot of kids and older people."

By noon, after she had finished serving all the food and assisting with the cleanup, Patel would go home to have her own lunch before heading over to the senior citizens home.

There she saw the effects of years of intense guerrilla war that was once part of Ayacucho's daily life. A 2003 Peruvian government report found that nearly 70,000 people died or disappeared in guerrilla warfare around Ayacucho and nearby areas through the 1980s and '90s.

"Ayacucho has a really violent and depressing history, and a lot of those people lost their families to war so they don't have anybody else," she said. "It was hard to talk to them, and so one of our translators would come with us. I would have a few people sitting with me, and talking to them and having that human contact really helped them.

"I would be there for a few hours each afternoon," she added, "and that's how I spent every day in Peru."

But the climax of Patel's trip was the village of Llanos de Morales in Guatemala, where she spent her final three weeks.

"Guatemala was very hands-on," she said. "Up to that point, I had lived in a house, but there I was living in a remote village with a host family. There you could really see the poverty and ... that you were making an impact."

That is where she found herself working on several civic projects in a village of fewer than 300.

"We worked pretty much from sunrise to sunset," she said. "The local school was in such a dilapidated state. Our project was to build fencing around it and do other enhancements, such as working on the walkway leading to it.

"Another project," she explained, "was a road renovation project involving a lot of ditch digging, as the roads there were horrible. If it rained, it became impossible for the buses to go by."

Her last night was one of the most vivid memories she has of her trip.

"At the town hall of Llanos de Morales, more than 100 people sang 'Happy Birthday' to me, and that was July 13," she said. "They had planned a party that night, with just the thank-you speeches and all that, but then they found out it was my birthday, too, so it ended up all happening together."

Patel said the experience was significant for her, especially given her own roots.

"It was important for me since my parents lived like this in India," she said. "But because they came and settled here, I didn't have the chance to see it for myself.

"They [Patel's parents] were in a position to spoil my older brother and me, but they didn't," she added. "The conditions where I went in South America are exactly like what I have heard my whole life about India, and like what I have seen during trips back."

Patel recommends the experience to anyone who is interested in seeing the Third World and giving back there.

"Everything there was just so minimal, and you really start to realize what it means to live with pain in your external circumstances," she said. "Yet in every single place I went to, they lived their lives with such pride.

"Though many times they didn't even know how things were going to go for them the next day ... they opened their hearts and minds to me," she continued. "I think it forces you to live the same way."

Chandni Patel planned and organized her trip with the help of CrossCulturalSolutions.org (Brazil and Peru) and GlobalCitizens.org (Guatemala).

http://ems.gmnews.com/news/2006/0913/Front_Page/024.html