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BEYOND *our* BORDERS

The Missionary “Look”

BY CARA SWINYAR



I used to think student missionaries had everything figured out. I didn't know exactly what happened during their dreamy, far-away mission experiences, but they always came back with a certain “look” in their eyes. This “look” told me these guys were serious. They'd done the job, and could whip out a sermon or a children's story faster than you could say, “Weren't you a student missionary?”

Now, after spending six months on the beautiful Micronesian island of Yap, I'm starting to wonder if I'll have that same “look” when I come home at the end of this year. I'm definitely doing “the job.” I've got lesson plans sitting next to me for 18 rambunctious seventh graders to prove it! The job is seldom easy. While resources, equipment, and textbooks are quite limited, rain and leaky roofs are not—which explains the extensive mopping in our classroom after each rainstorm!

And stories? Oh, yes, I have stories! Like the Friday night we got stuck in the mud after vespers and began hiking home in the pouring rain. Like my first day in the classroom, looking out at my class and realizing I didn't know a thing about teaching! Or the first night I went spear-fishing in the middle of the ocean with nothing more than a small flashlight and a rusty spear gun. There was also the time God protected us from an escaped convict who robbed several of the student missionaries while we slept. Or the times we found centipedes by our bed, cockroaches in the shower, and lice in our hair. ... You want stories? As my students would say, “I got plenty, teacher!”

Being a student missionary has given me a crash course in teaching and great mission stories for the rest of my life. But more importantly, it's given me the opportunity



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to touch the lives of hurting people—most of all, my students.

I think of Amber, whose father beats her; Tony, whose stepmother yells at him; Larry, whose mother abandoned him; and Lindsay, whose father only visits her and her mother when he decides to take a break from his other girlfriends. ... I've come to love my students. Several gray hairs later, they are still the reason I stay here even when I'm exhausted or homesick.

But how can I help them? I have come to realize that on my own there is nothing I can do to make my students or myself successful or happy. But God can. All I can do is my best, and let God take it from there.

My six months here have helped me understand God is all I've got. When

the Internet connection doesn't work because it's raining, or there is no mail because the airport is shut down, God is with me. When students act up, and other student missionaries begin to drive me crazy, God is here. It is this realization, this acceptance, [and] this trust that gives student missionaries “the look.” It's a look that says no matter what comes our way, God is in control.

Cara Swinyar is a senior elementary education major and an Andrews University student missionary in Yap. She is from South Lancaster, Massachusetts.