11-19-2009


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MBA Student Helps Guatemalan Coffee Cooperative

Amber De Lucenay (St. Petersburg, Fla.) November 19, 2009 - When Amber De Lucenay registered for her first MBA course in January 2009 as a USF St. Petersburg student, she chose a course that fit her full-time work schedule at Progress Energy. But the class, which included nine days studying sustainability and fair-trade farming in Guatemala, has shaped her degree program in ways she did not expect.

The 19 students in the College of Business class traveled to Guatemala in March to examine the Latin American business and economic environment with a focus on economic sustainability and the ways in which organizations simultaneously manage social and environmental concerns. Designed for MBA students, the course focused on the business of fair trade and organic coffee. As a service learning course, the students worked in the coffee fields of the Santa Anita cooperative farm for a day with a Guatemalan family.

That was when De Lucenay's goals shifted into focus.

"When we arrived in Guatemala we went straight to the co-op," De Lucenay said. "I immediately felt the urge to return to help educate the families on accounting and ways they could improve their farming business."

Over the Thanksgiving holiday, she traveled with three friends and spent a week volunteering at the farm. She donated her laptop computer with accounting software for the farmers to use. She trained the one high school graduate at the farm how to do bookkeeping. She brought donated toys and art supplies for the 65 children living on the cooperative. She even brought customized basketball jerseys for the farm's recreational women's basketball team.

"I have a friend with a screen-printing business and he offered to print the jerseys for $50," De Lucenay said. She raised $1800 from a private fundraiser and by selling coffee grown at Santa Anita. The money will provide water filtration systems for each of the farm's households – systems designed and produced in Guatemala. She partnered with Chris Eaton of Bridge Builders Inc., the organization that helped organize the course, to coordinate the donations for the farm.

"Amber's efforts will assist them in their business planning and in their financial management," Eaton said. "The margins are so narrow for them that any ways they can maintain the business in a more efficient manner will have a huge impact on members of the coffee cooperative. Additionally, the water filters will allow families to drink clean, parasite free water. The potential health impact is immeasurable."

Todd Shank, PhD, associate professor of finance, and Tom Aincough, PhD, associate professor of marketing, taught the course, their first study abroad course in Latin America. Shank and Aincough have led the popular Business in China summer course at the College of Business for five years.

De Lucenay completed a three-credit independent study with Shank this semester to create a business plan for Santa Anita.

"The families at Santa Anita run side businesses to make money, but they don't have the business structure or education to know if the businesses, such as selling banana bread or roasted coffee, are profitable," Shank said. "Amber's business plan will help them structure their accounting, marketing and management."

De Lucenay, a St. Petersburg native, earned a bachelor's degree in Accounting and Spanish from Oglethorpe University in Georgia. She worked in Boston before returning to St. Petersburg. She has worked at Progress Energy for more than two years in their accounting department.

Through her MBA program and her extra efforts in Guatemala, De Lucenay is getting to help others while developing her skills as a business leader and Spanish speaker.
"I'm really passionate about what I'm doing," she said.

-USF St. Petersburg-