

On a sweltering September day in Ecuador, Shanna Covarrubias, then 20 years old, stood among her study-abroad classmates and watched as a dozen giggling children raced by before the college students started the morning's worship service. Among the morning chaos, the faint hum of Spanish worship music created a peaceful ambiance. Although the language that buzzed around her was foreign, Covarrubias felt like she was home.

"It was so peaceful and simple. People truly appreciated everything and everyone around them," Covarrubias said.

During this trip abroad in 2013, her passion for working with children and young adults grew. It continues to do so as she has been working with young people ever since.

"As a kid, I would set up stuffed animals in my room and teach to them. At first, I wanted to teach ballet, then math, and then Spanish, but my plan to be a teacher never changed," she said.

For the past five years, she has taught at Metro East Lutheran High School in Edwardsville, Illinois. She spends her free time sponsoring low-income children in Latin American countries through a nonprofit organization called Compassion International, providing funds for school supplies and clothes. She also regularly goes on service trips outside the U.S.

In 2019, for example, she took a group of students to Puerto Rico to help build a school.

"Throughout the whole trip, she encouraged us to feel confident in our abilities," said Sophia Bold, who went on the trip. "She always gave grace and understanding to the residents and students."

Covarrubias' calm demeanor on the Puerto Rico trip was something she'd practiced. Her own first night abroad in Ecuador was far from comfortable.

As the bustle of the Ecuadorean airport overtook her senses, the Olivet University junior found herself in a new country with lost luggage, a foggy mind, and a stomach full of dread as she realized just how alone she was.

"Our flight had landed late; customs was stressful. I couldn't remember the words for luggage or anything helpful," Covarrubias said.

Then she saw the warm smile and kind eyes of Lucy Lamache, the leader of their study-abroad group, holding a sign with Covarrubias' name scribbled on it.

Throughout the trip, Covarrubias witnessed Lamache counsel peers from her office chair when their feelings of homesickness and doubt overtook them. On group outings to lively cities or natural wonders, her soft words of encouragement instilled confidence in the students and their ability to speak Spanish. By the end of the trip, Covarrubias considered Lamache a role model and sought to mirror Lamache's teaching style.

"She was extremely joyous but calmed our concerns and stresses with her presence," Covarrubias said. "She was just a rock that I knew I could rely on to speak godly truth, wisdom, peace, and counsel into my life. She taught me a lot about what it looks like to be a woman of God and a caring teacher and leader."

Lamache's comforting presence seems to have rubbed off on the young teacher.

"I think her best quality is how welcoming she is. Every day in her classroom felt like a break from all the chaos – a safe space," Bold said.

Back in 2013, Covarrubias spent her time in Ecuador trekking through the diverse ecosystem of the Galapagos Islands, wading in hammerhead-infested waters and connecting

with passionate people in bustling, colorful cities. She felt so comfortable there, in fact, that she dreaded going home.

"I had reverse culture shock. When I was back in the States, I became resentful. I hated the wastefulness and impatience, and everything was so fast-past," Covarrubias said.

Though bittersweet, the trip's end left her with an important task. She came home to young faces needing a teacher in and out of the classroom. She also returned with plans to sponsor her first little girl through Compassion International. Lamache, a former sponsored child herself, had introduced her to the program.

Nine years and two mission trips later, Covarrubias plans to stay internationally involved through a school-building project with her Dominican friend Radhames Quezada and by continuing to help her two sponsored children graduate. For the time being, though, she is content in her American classroom, raising a new generation of kind, curious hearts.

"Here I get to love so many people," she said. "That is so much fun."