



## Making a Difference

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By Rob Kirkbride



**W**hile many companies at NeoCon were giving away iPads, izzy+ decided to give away a trip to Nicaragua. Though it is a beautiful country, this was not a vacation to a swanky, hip resort. Designers who “won” were expected to go to the poor Central American country and use their talents to make a difference.

And they did. The izzy+ sponsored trip that included six designers, two izzy+ staff members and two people from the Grand Valley State University Applied Global Innovation Initiative (AGII) spent Nov. 1-6 in Nicaragua using their design skills to improve the education system in the impoverished nation.

This wasn't a publicity stunt for izzy+ Founder Chuck Saylor and his staff. “The idea for a trip to Nicaragua is at the heart of what we are all about at izzy+,” said Saylor. “Right from the beginning, our focus as a company has always been around the power of collaboration and sharing ideas that can strengthen us all and make us better as we pursue common goals and the common good. Along with the power of collaboration and the ability to accomplish more as a team, there is the opportunity to make a difference around global needs like early childhood education.”

Spearheading the trip was izzy+ Market Development Strategist Brandon Reame, who is part of the AGII group and has been to Nicaragua eight times. This visit was by far, he said, the best because he could share with the design community his love of the country and work toward solving the problems that it faces.

“It turned out to be a really dynamic, really fun group,” he said. “Everyone was easy going. By the end of the trip we had this celebration dinner and I think everyone felt like we had known each other for years. To see the designers come together and see a group of people rally around a cause over four busy days was really cool to see.”

The group had just four days to work, though the projects they tackled were complex. Nicaragua seems to be snakebiten. The country is trying hard to overcome the after effects of dictatorship, civil war and natural disasters. It is one of the poorest countries in the Western Hemisphere with per capita income of about \$1,000 a year.

Reame and izzy+ began brainstorming what a trip to Nicaragua would look like last spring. The company wanted to make a lasting impact and do something productive. So they partnered with AGII. AGII has a simple mission: Through product innovation that is interdisciplinary, intercultural and innovative in approach the group aims to empower individuals (communities, faculty, staff, and students) to address challenging environmental, economic and social issues facing the world's poorest populations.

Involvement by Grand Valley State University faculty in Nicaragua dates back to 1998 when Hurricane Mitch devastated a vast area of Central America, including the mountainous northwestern region of Nicaragua, where rural residents grow coffee and other crops on small-scale farms (or fincas). Faculty, students and staff from the Kirkhof School of Nursing at GVSU organized and led Health Brigades to provide relief to approximately 4,000 residents of the protected landscape of Reserva Natural Mirafior in early 1999. During their travels, they developed relationships in Managua, Estelí and Mirafior. They befriended residents of several of the isolated communities in Mirafior, who subsequently helped organize and assist in additional Brigades that continued through 2003. That

work expanded and the group now makes several trips to the country each year.

The goal of the program is to stimulate economic activity in Nicaragua by designing, manufacturing and selling products that are desired by Nicaraguans, that can be sold for a price that Nicaraguans are willing to pay and can be manufactured in Nicaragua. The program that developed its first five years in collaboration with a regional, comprehensive university in the United States and two universities in Nicaragua now is done with the four regional campuses of La UNAN and the large university in Managua.

The izzy+ group focused on two areas, both dealing with education: They worked on redesigning educational “kits” used by teachers in their classrooms; and helped design the entrance to a new school building.

The teaching kits provide students and teachers with about a month's worth of materials and curriculum. Since most schools in the country are nothing more than tin shacks with dirt floors and the teachers make no more than \$35 a month (and they are expected to supply materials to the students), the kits are invaluable. AGII is trying to produce kits that cost no more than \$50. The goal of the izzy+ design team was to make the kits better -- more inspiring and easier to use. Though it is a small step, one of the designers attending the izzy+ trip created a table the students could use from the lid of the kit itself. The kit not only holds the contents, it's also more productive.

The designers also helped a local organization redesign the front entrance of a school that it is developing. The organization is founded by a retired professor from the University of Barcelona and the group is trying to refurbish a building into a new school. The designers on the izzy+ trip were able to provide some sketches and suggest materials that will bring the building to life.

“Making a difference in the lives of others is incredibly inspiring and powerful,” Saylor said. “I love the possibility and

potential of leveraging design, designers and the creative process to bring support and encouragement to other parts of the world while sharing in a very meaningful and memorable experience. It's my hope that we can build upon the success of this first trip and make this an annual event that izzy+ puts together with the A&D community and potentially others in the industry to engage in cross-cultural exchange and undertaking problem-solving projects.”

After four days of hard work, the group was treated to an official thank you dinner Sunday evening, Reame said, complete with a traditional dinner, ceremonial dances and gifts for all participants. The group also had some free time on Monday to hike through the mountains and rain forest and tour a coffee plantation. The designers who participated told Reame it was one of the most difficult, inspiring and rewarding projects they have ever worked on. “The participants were in a country they did not know, experiencing a culture they did not know about and working through a translator,” he said. “They were working shoulder to shoulder with people making a couple dollars a day, yet they all came together to solve the problems they were presented with.

“These are designers used to working with multimillion dollar space with the best of everything. This was the opposite -- no resources, limited time and they can't speak to team members. Yet everyone came out of the experience much stronger, much better. Lots of the designers said they now have a better appreciation for the tools and resources they have in the U.S.”

The trip to Nicaragua is a far cry from the luxurious trips the company used to give away. And it is the first time izzy+ has added a service aspect to a company-sponsored trip. “This is all about bringing people together to work for something more meaningful,” Reame said. “This is the first trip of its kind for us. Our goal is to do more in the future.”





