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Jill Rodrigues
Roger Williams University

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The Power of Youth

With a diploma fresh in hand, Laura Dushkin '13 heads for Costa Rica to inspire youth leadership through community development and conservation projects



Laura Dushkin '13 (right) and another volunteer with Amigos de las Americas pose for a picture while working on a community development project with the nonprofit organization in Ecuador last summer.

May 14, 2013 | Jill Rodrigues '05

BRISTOL, R.I. — When a homesick high school volunteer cries on her shoulder over the difficulty of transitioning to living with a host family in a foreign country, Laura Dushkin knows how to help the youngsters through it and learn to embrace their new surroundings and opportunities. She's been in their shoes.

Since she was 16, Dushkin has spent many summers volunteering with Amigos de las Americas, a nonprofit organization that sends American high school students to Latin American countries to engage in community development projects, cultural exchange and youth leadership training. Dushkin, who attended high school in San Diego, Calif., has worked at sites in Honduras and Ecuador on both a volunteer and professional basis, eventually serving as a project supervisor. Upon graduation this Saturday, she will be promoted to senior project supervisor in Costa Rica.

From May through August, Dushkin will oversee the physical and emotional health of 45 high school volunteers. Before the students – who hail from across the U.S. – arrive in Perez Zeledon, Dushkin will have set up their host families and meal plans, contacted local community leaders, and developed a training program that partners the American youths with Costa Rican teenagers on educational activities. As partners, the young men and women will tackle community-building projects like painting a school or an uplifting mural, seeding a community garden, or coordinating a cultural fair or dance.

Dushkin will keep a close eye on all of the volunteers. Each week she will hike miles through forest and over mountains with only a backpack filled with supplies to each of the 25 rural communities in which the youth have been placed. She says that, typically, the students are quite homesick when she first meets them and require some advice on how to manage their apprehension. Some also may be physically ill and require assisted trips to the local medical facilities. Rather quickly, however, she says the volunteers adapt and thrive in their host communities – and can't wait to enthusiastically share their experiences.

"I like to describe the supervisor job as a 'firefighter,'" she says. "You walk into the community and put out fires. Sometimes it's big fires; sometimes it's little fires. And sometimes it's forest fires in each community every week."

But she's prepared for all of it. Aside from her years of experience with Amigos, the biology, chemistry and Spanish language major has gained valuable skills in her academic studies and extracurricular activities that she says directly apply to this next chapter in her life.

For three years, Dushkin has worked as a research assistant in RWU's biology research lab conducting research on marine viruses. Her senior year was dedicated to independent genetic research on cyanobacteria, which she presented at a meeting of the American Society for Microbiology in Denver, Colo., earlier this month. She says that working in a research lab taught her dedication, attention to detail and time management, supplementing her strong academic background in science.

Another role at RWU improved her leadership skills and showed her the value of bringing communities together and working toward a common goal, Dushkin says. As an Eco-Rep Coordinator she supervised 10 students in promoting and teaching sustainability and recycling on campus and in the local public schools.

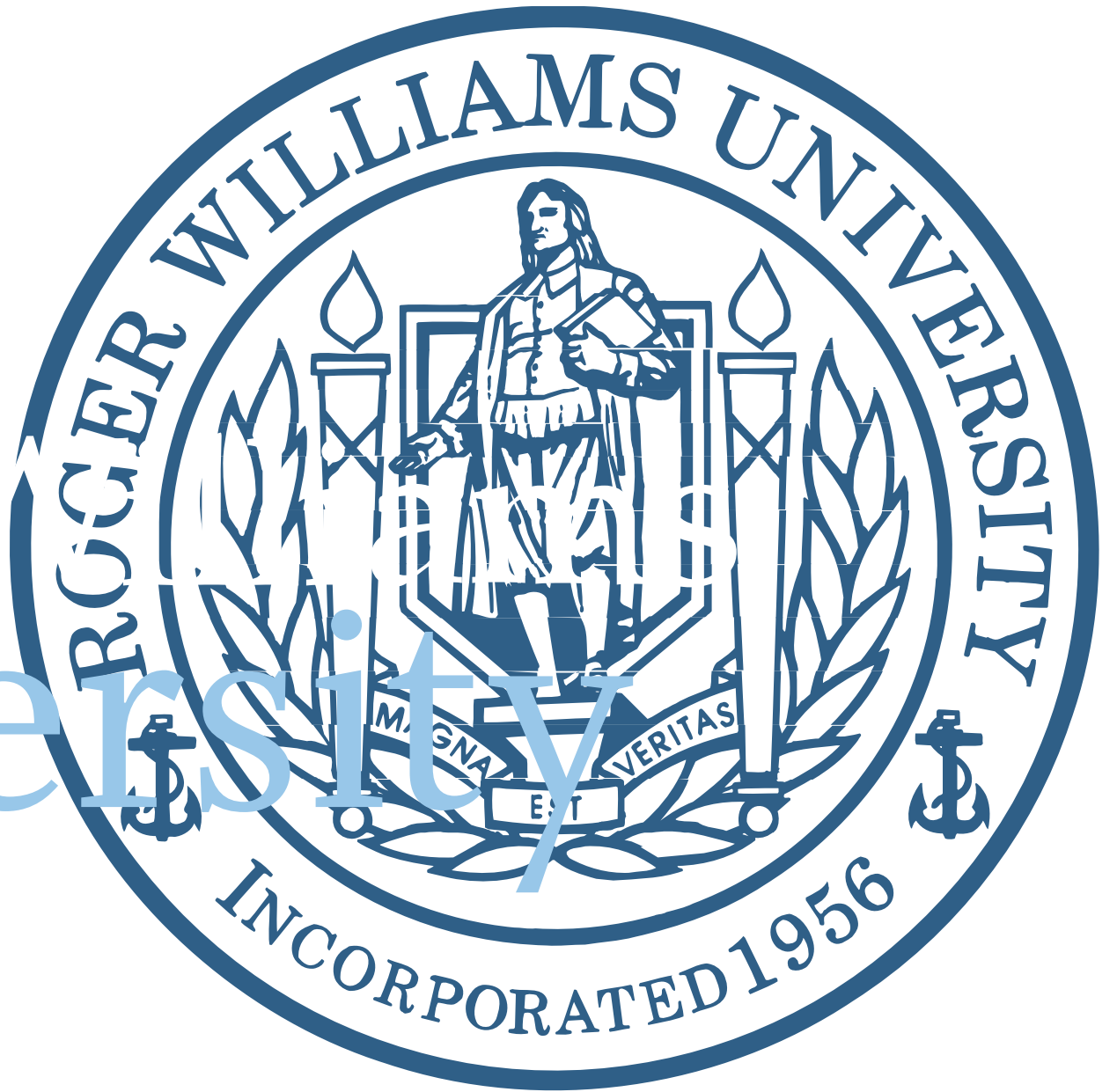
"Being an eco-rep coordinator has helped a lot in preparing me for this work. I learned how the university works and how to make myself heard, what my values are and how to manage a group," says Dushkin, adding that it reinforced confidence in her leadership abilities.

In addition to spending time in Costa Rican host communities, Dushkin and her chargers will devote three weeks to conservation projects – trail building and maintenance – in a national park. It will be a shared freshman experience for all of the volunteers – many of the Costa Rican youths often are unable to afford to explore their country's parks, Dushkin says. The entire experience – which yields months worth of work in just eight weeks – plants the roots of environmental advocacy and self confidence.

"I believe in the power of youth. It's amazing what they're able to accomplish in a summer. You never would have imagined 16- or 17-year-olds leading a meeting of 100 or 200 people," she says. "I think it's the most responsibility that a young person can have, as I'm graduating college and will be in charge of 45 people a week. And I think that's amazing that it's allowed, but also that it works. When you put people in that situation – even if it seems it's maybe too hard and too challenging, they can strive and thrive in that environment."

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