

## The Messenger COMMUNITY

# "It's not just a building, it's a symbol of hope"

*North Gower's Parker Armstrong builds schools for a sustainable future in Nicaragua*

By JEFF MORRIS

North Gower's Parker Armstrong, an engineering student at Carleton University, traded classes for concrete this summer as he travelled to Nicaragua to complete an internship with the NGO SchoolBOX. Armstrong worked alongside SchoolBOX's construction crew to build three classrooms in impoverished Nicaraguan communities, and to evaluate the sustainability of the organization's programs.

Armstrong first became involved with SchoolBOX in 2014 as a student at South Carleton High School, and became motivated to contribute to SchoolBOX's mission of "Making Education Possible" in even bigger ways. Through his engineering internship this summer, he produced a report on the social, economic, and environmental sustainability of SchoolBOX's programs, specifically their Tools 4 Schools program, which has constructed 80 classrooms



Parker Armstrong of North Gower poses for a photo with five of his new friends from Nicaragua. The Carleton engineering student spent the summer building three classrooms in an impoverished community in the Central American country.

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in Nicaragua to date.

"In 2014 I did a volunteer trip with SchoolBOX," he said. "I did it with a couple of friends of mine and we knew some people from our school who had done it previously. I wanted to get my own group together so I went down with some friends, and it was a really surreal and awesome experience."

Armstrong came back from that trip wanting to do more. The following June, Armstrong went to Nicaragua with another group of friends to work on another school.

"After that I was looking at my finances and I couldn't afford to do another trip, but I would really like to do something to help out more" he said.

Armstrong and some friends embarked on a

fundraising effort for SchoolBOX for books, bathrooms, or anything that could help.

"I was looking for a co-op job at the time, but there was nothing that really stood out to me as something I wanted to do in the future," he said.

Armstrong texted a friend in Nicaragua asking if there was something there he could do.

"After that day, it kind of snowballed," Armstrong said. "There were meetings and phone calls and interviews. I got the opportunity to go down to Nicaragua to work with SchoolBOX for three months."

The opportunity provided an unforgettable experience.

"I wouldn't say this trip was better than before, as they were all in-

credible," he said. "They have just all been so different that there isn't any way to compare them."

Armstrong said that SchoolBOX's social, economic and environmentally conscious building process are meeting its goals towards encouraging sustainability within the communities it is working in, along with the organization itself. He credits his studies in Architectural Conservation and Sustainability Engineering at Carleton University for providing him with important technical expertise, which he put into practice in Nicaragua, where only 56 per cent of children graduate primary school according to UNICEF. He designed the plans for a new bathroom built at the Mirna Martinez School, in the Valle de Las Americas, Nicaragua, that would conserve building materials, but provide spacious and clean facilities for the children and teachers to use.

"What was really special for me about this was that I was able to work with the project all the way through, from breaking ground to putting the last little bit of paint on the wall" he said.

The school, he would learn, was beyond a

place for the kids to learn. It became a vortex of the community.

"You would see the communities start to come together more," he said. "The kids get more active and everyone gets more excited because now there's a school. It's more than just a building, it's a symbol. That's what was special to me - to get to know the community and to see the whole process work."

Armstrong made lifelong friends in Nicaragua and stressed the importance of having a humble attitude, and working alongside communities to empower them and give them hope.

"A lot of times, communities feel they can never break out of poverty, but I hope the work that SchoolBOX is doing helps them to know they can have a better future," Armstrong said. "Everyone was so welcoming, and I feel so attached to them. Since Day One, they knew my name and I knew as many names as I could. I would help teach them English in the nighttime. They always wanted to play soccer or play tag. They are super active and positive and it was an incredible experience to get to know them."

Sarah Kerr, SchoolBOX's Executive Director, expressed her gratitude for Armstrong's



Parker Armstrong said it was rewarding to work on a project from the turning of the sod all the way through to the last coat of paint on the walls.

contribution to the organization.

"His research, which intersects both engineering and development perspectives, is helping us to better achieve our mission," she said. "His work is already having a real-world impact in Nicaragua."

Armstrong is also partnering with a group of friends and members of the North Gower and Stittsville area community to raise funds for SchoolBOX. The money

they have raised so far will go towards the construction of another new bathroom using his design. Their larger goal is to raise enough money to build an entire classroom with SchoolBOX. They are hosting a 'Paint Night' fundraiser for SchoolBOX in Ottawa this November. To learn more about this and other fundraising events, check the SchoolBOX Facebook page or visit the website at [www.schoolbox.ca/events](http://www.schoolbox.ca/events).

## About SchoolBOX:

SchoolBOX is committed to 'Making Education Possible' for the children of Nicaragua. SchoolBOX implements cost effective programming by building schools, providing school supplies, libraries, and teacher training. SchoolBOX has built 80 classrooms, and 46 washrooms in Nicaragua and serves over 17,487 students and teachers in 96 communities on an annual basis.

Our community is united in love for the children we serve and the belief that education can defeat poverty. SchoolBOX is comprised of thousands of people from different faiths and socio-economic backgrounds. We empower educators and students, and they in turn empower their communities and change our world.