

Meet Lyman Briggs College Junior Christine Sarikas: An Undergraduate Research Experience in Nicaragua



LBC biology junior Christine Sarikas is thrilled to share an experience of a lifetime. Sarikas and a group of students accompanied LBC faculty member Gerald Urquhart to do research in Nicaragua. Undergraduate participation in faculty research is one of the benefits students receive at Michigan State University's Lyman Briggs College, a residential college for the study of science in the context of society. Study Abroad programs help Briggs students gain valuable research experience that makes what they learn in

classroom come to life. Sarikas says that this is one of the reasons why she chose Lyman Briggs; "It gave me a step-up in regards to research. I got to start researching my first few weeks on campus, which very few other schools offer." Christine shares these excerpts from her journal:



This past summer, I was lucky enough to have the opportunity to travel to Nicaragua with Dr. Gerald Urquhart and work as his research assistant. For five weeks I traveled across Nicaragua and assisted in two projects: one on ecotourism and the other on documenting mammals in the rainforest. In addition to these two projects, I was able to develop and carry out a research project on my own: recording data on *Dipteryx oleifera*, a tree in the Fabaceae family that is a key species in

tropical rainforests. I and another student, Justin Haveman, recorded GPS coordinates of the trees, also known as the Eboe tree, and took information on their sizes. I will use this data in conjunction with remote sensing images later this year.

Living in Nicaragua was a shock at first. The only traveling I'd done outside the USA was Western Europe. I had never been to a 3rd world country and I spoke only about ten words of Spanish. Their way of life there is vastly different from ours. Nicaraguans spoke blatantly of how corrupt their government is and how difficult it is to find a steady, legal job in many areas. Road systems are nonexistent in many areas, and I saw many slums filled with tiny, metal huts. For five weeks I had no access to hot water or laundry services.

The major difference between doing research in East Lansing and doing research in Nicaragua is the amount of physical activity it took just to get data in Nicaragua. Guides were needed to clear trails through the jungle for us to look for specimens. I spent several hours in an unstable dugout canoe going across the Caribbean Sea, I had to cross a swamp where the water reached almost to my waist, I got stopped by the Nicaraguan navy three times so that my bags could get searched for drugs. The living conditions were rougher too. A little dorm room looks much nicer after you've spent a week swinging from a plastic hammock strung across someone's porch. I began to think longingly of Holmes Hall Cafeteria after eating exclusively rice and beans for weeks on end. I also constantly had to be aware of my surroundings. Poisonous animals, razor sharp plants, and crumbling paths were common. Once, I unknowingly walked within an inch of a deadly snake because I was concentrating on taking notes.

If it was harder to live in Nicaragua, then the rewards were that much greater. Finding sections of untouched rainforest after spending two hours getting there was thrilling. Nicaragua is also filled with wildlife. During my trip I spotted several types of snakes (both poisonous and non-poisonous), dozens of frogs and lizards, some groups of monkeys, a wild armadillo, a myriad of bird species, an once (bird), and a puma who had come out of the jungle to investigate our motor boat. I had the chance to visit a country most people are unable to locate on a map and learn about its ecology.

Sarikas is from Arlington Heights, Illinois, and a graduate of Prospect High School. She hopes to one day work for a nonprofit that will allow her to focus on environmental issues in third world countries.

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