

Brendan Wood

### It Pays to Volunteer

Within the first two weeks of being in Spain, every student filled out a sheet of paper that listed different sets of goals we wanted to accomplish with our time here. I only had two bullet points on mine: learn to play flamenco guitar and make friends with a Spaniard. They sounded realistic enough but still challenging nevertheless. A few days later we heard about an optional meeting that would explain the various ways we could volunteer here so I went and learned about teaching english to kids in a colegio. They set me up to teach four different classes in a school really close to where my host family lived, in los remedios, with kids aged 14-18.

I must admit, the first classes were very nerve racking, mainly because I was not used to having control of 20 students at a time, let alone kids who speak a different language. Over time, however, the classes and students grew on me and I looked forward to class and what we would talk about. One of the most important things I realized right away was that this would not be only in english because I had to speak to them very slowly and at the end ask, do you understand? Of course they didn't understand my american instructions...vale, voy a explicar en español... and that's how it went, having to explain activities in slow english, and then repeat them in Spanish. This bilingual learning method was teaching me at the same time I was teaching them.

The best part of this volunteer-teaching was that it introduced me to my friend Pablo. The first two days of classes I had the kids go around the room and tell me what their interests were and what they like to do in their free time. Pablo introduced himself and said he loved playing guitar and is in a band and when the class asked me the

same question, I explained how I'm here looking to learn how to play flamenco guitar but I don't want to pay a lot of money for lessons. After class Pablo came up to me and asked if I wanted to hang out with him sometime. We exchanged phone numbers and hung out that weekend. Turns out he's been studying flamenco for a couple years and knows a lot about the guitar and was interested in learning about rock music. Over the past few months we've met about twice a week to share our mutual knowledge of guitar: I will teach him some rock based techniques and then he'll teach me some flamenco. I safely can say I checked both goals off the list, I have a spanish friend and I have learned a lot about the spanish guitar, and all of this came from me stepping out of my comfort zone to volunteer in a country I barely knew before I arrived...one thing is clear: it pays to volunteer abroad.