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## OV freshman challenges herself with service abroad

By KATHERINE LAZARUS

BRANDON —How does a 14-year-old freshman at Otter Valley High School whose passions are playing the clarinet in OV's band, enjoys Irish step dancing, loves to cook, read, being outdoors and spending time with family and friends suddenly decide to venture to a remote area of Costa Rica this summer?

One clue is to listen to her mother, Marci Hayes, speak about her daughter, Abigail.

"My daughter is kind, compassionate, very curious, joyful, and full of life. She meets everything with a positive outlook and is always willing to try something new," Marci said about Abigail. "She is braver than me! I don't know if I would have gone to Costa Rica at 14."

Abigail's answer is simpler:

"It's nice to see the look on someone's face when you do something nice for them," she

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said.

With only a hiking backpack and a hardhat, Hayes will fly to San José for orientation and ziplining through Costa Rica's dense jungle, then continue to the Rainforest Action Center. Among colorful parrots, egrets, tapirs, and jaguars, Hayes will hike to her remote homestay family, the Fonseca's, two hours outside of the village of El Brujo, a community of about 120 people.

Hayes thinks the best way to help others is "being there. Not necessarily giving them something, but noticing them and giving them a smile."

From July 8 to 23, Abigail will join a group of 17 other students ages 14 to 18 to build a greenhouse for the local medicine man, Don Albino, in the rolling hills of a virgin rainforest among permaculture farms.

At the end of their service, in order to leave the remote region, the volunteers will raft down the whitewater of the Class II and III Savegre River to the town of Uvita with their guide Pablo Lopez Salazar, to reach more populated areas and motorized transportation.

"I am most excited about meeting new people and learning from them," Abigail said in a recent interview. "Costa Rica is one of the safest third world countries and a humbler environment. The 'ticos,' the Costa Ricans, believe that things happen when they happen, like mealtimes, and family is very important to them. It seems like a simpler place."

The provincial government of the Savegre Region wants this greenhouse for Albino because he is the best person in the area to give medical attention, since the closest hospital in San Isidro is four hours away.

Does the Otter Valley freshman have any second thoughts about journeying so far away?

"I'm most nervous about the unknown," Abigail said. "I don't know anyone and I've never been there. But those are the exciting parts, too."

The freshman has never met anyone on this trip besides Zooming with the director of the program, who intentionally wants the volunteers to meet all at once when they arrive. "They don't want you to look anyone up on social media or be presumptuous," she said.

Once there, she will shovel



**MARCI HAYES, LEFT, made the tough decision to allow her daughter, Abigail to travel to Costa Rica at the age of 14.**

Contributed photo

rocks, mix cement, and stack blocks while a foreman assists and teaches the volunteers about the art of building.

Marci had to sign a risk management waiver for the trip that cited possible injuries like getting hurt by elephants, which "freaked me out a little," Marci said. "Initially I didn't really want her to go, but you have to support them and encourage independence."

As Hayes practices the Spanish she has been learning since

the first grade, she's also eager to learn more about the language in what is an immersive program. She will learn about plants and herbs from Albino, while his wife, Rosa, teaches how to cook local foods such as 'gallo pinto.' They will also observe native agricultural practices like harvesting cocoa beans, and converse daily in Spanish with their host families.

"I am nervous about everything being different, but doing something hard or unfamiliar

can make you stronger and braver," she said.

Abigail said she was inspired to travel because of the "wonderful time" her aunt had studying abroad in Italy and by her mother Marci's experience growing up with parents who hosted exchange students. Also her grandfather, James Hayes who she lives with along with her mother and grandmother (Marie Hayes), all of Goshen has traveled to many different countries.

With Abigail's commitment to travel, she worked hard to earn a \$2,200 grant to help pay for the \$6,195 expense of the program (plus airfare), and that sealed the deal.

But it still was a tough decision Abigail's mom.

"When she said, 'Mom, I want to go to a different country, I was like, 'Umm...'" Marci said about letting her 14-year old daughter take the trip. "No being there as her protector is scary. I am a single mom, so we do a lot together and we have a special relationship."

But in the end, Marci agreed she said, because "there is so much to be learned in the things we aren't even aware of."