

MOUNT SAINT MARY ACADEMY



Operation Smile Mission Trip to Mexico Taught Mount Saint Mary Academy Senior Rosie Rittenhouse to Cherish Every Moment

WATCHUNG – A one-year-old boy named Aamir was scampering about when Rosie Rittenhouse '18 made his acquaintance during an Operation Smile mission trip to Oaxaca, Mexico. As he and his family prepared for the surgery that would help fix his cleft palate, Rosie was there to provide the encouragement and support they needed.

Rosie learned about Operation Smile when she was a student at St. Patrick School in Chatham. When she came to Mount Saint Mary Academy in Watchung, where she is now a senior, her interest increased when she heard a presentation about alumna Julia Hadley's mission trip experience.

Mount Saint Mary Academy maintains a robust membership in its Operation Smile Club, which is led by Campus Minister and Director of Theology, Isabel Gachko.

In the summer of 2016, Rosie attended Operation Smile's International Student Leadership Conference in San Diego, California, and applied in the winter of 2017 to attend a mission trip. During the summer of 2017, she attended mission trip training in Rome, Italy where she met fellow Operation Smile members from over 30 countries.

As she embarked on her mission trip to Mexico, Rosie flew to Houston and next took a small plane to Oaxaca late at night where she was greeted by a friendly team of doctors and residents.

"The first day, I was homesick but not after that because everyone was very friendly and the environment was easy to call home," she said, noting that her trip lasted 10 days, from November 8 to 18.

"I always enjoyed babysitting and playing with kids," noted Rosie, who said that her joy deepened when she met Aamir on his first day of surgery, running around in his lion-themed onesie.

Bonding with him and his family at such a crucial time filled a void, she realized, and Aamir's mother still keeps in touch with Rosie since his cleft palate was fixed by Operation Smile's doctors.

In fact, the next day, when Rosie visited the shelter where patients are cared for before and after surgery, she was gifted with a bracelet from Aamir's family that said "Rosie, Forever in my Heart," as well as a keepsake mug.

“I realized I made a real impact. I learned that it’s important to take each and every moment and cherish it,” she said.

During her mission trip, Rosie’s Operation Smile team purchase 66 shoes and 66 pajamas for 132 children at a nearby orphanage.

“The kids were so happy. You could just feel the joy radiating from them,” she said. “Their happiness was so real and so present.”

Rosie has shared her Operation Smile trip experience with students in her Mount Saint Mary Academy theology class and friends outside of the school and she hopes to continue her work with the organization in college and possibly as a sponsor when she is older.