

## GPA's three weeks serving in Casco Viejo, Panama

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Renovating a playground to give local children a safe alternative to playing in the streets is just one of the service projects that about 25 volunteers from Generation Peace Academy (GPA) are assisting during three weeks in Casco Viejo, Panama.

So far the crew has cleaned the playground lot, scraped its walls, painted a base layer, and begun work designing a mural. The designers are GPA first-year participants Aika, Ben, Junta, Yuka, Mansoo, and Amy.



Mansoo described their vision: "It begins with a school of fish swimming through the ocean, until they begin to transform into birds who spread their wings and take flight, until they eventually surround a painting of the globe with the words 'Forgive, Love, and Unite.'"



GPA is partnering in Panama City with Amigos y Vecinos de Casco Antiguo (translated as “Friends and Neighbors of Old Casco”; abbreviated as AVACA), a nonprofit organization that works in the poorer communities of Casco Viejo, the historic district of Panama City. Last year GPA worked with AVACA to establish a volunteer-run recycling campaign.



The playground renovation will complement AVACA’s beautification and community building efforts throughout the city. This playground will serve as a model for other neighborhoods.

Children from the neighborhood have joined the GPA volunteers in the playground renovation every day, assisting in some external tasks while brightening the workday. Their energy is contagious and they also seem to find hope through GPA’s presence.



First-year GPA participant Gabby said: “The kids don’t have a lot in their lives, but they are so willing to give. We all recognize how much there is to gain from the pure hearts of children.”

GPA also spent a morning cleaning up the local streets surrounding the playground site. Local children were assigned as cleanup leaders, in order to educate others and encourage future street cleanliness. The neighborhood residents were so grateful that they brought the group refreshments.

GPA will also spend a few days volunteering at the San Jose de Malambo orphanage outside Panama City, where about 140 orphans of various ages live, including children with disabilities or who are HIV-positive. The orphanage has also expanded into a school, which serves 400 poor children in the surrounding area.

Michielu, another dedicated GPA first-year member, said how inspired he is to be serving Panama in these projects. “Although Panama is comparatively one of the more economically developed Latin American nations, it faces a challenge that is shared by so many countries around the world. Business development and tourism are very positive changes overall; however, these changes often make life very difficult for poor residents. We will be helping to create a space for the youth of this community who call this neighborhood their home,” Michielu said.

“I am very excited about serving others abroad and know that this is something that I will treasure for the rest of my life. I hope that I can bring back what I learn and share it with my friends, family, and community,” Michielu said.