



From left, Sandy Spring Friends School students Jason Gill, Anwar Fennel, Aura Kanogis, Tod Sinderson and Sarah Arnould gather plants that the villagers will strip, boil and weave into baskets. The students spent two weeks in Belize.

Sandy Spring Students Learn by Doing in Belize

Villagers Teach Traditions to Curious Contingent From Montgomery

By Allison Silberberg
Special to The Washington Post

For some of the Montgomery County students, it was the first time they used a passport and carried it across the border. For most, it was a time to explore an unknown culture and return home with an experience that changed their lives.

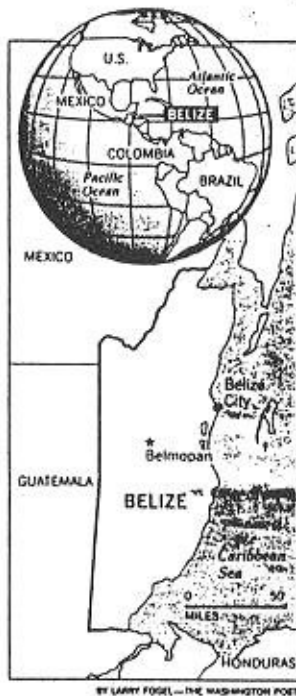
In mid-March, nine high school students from the Sandy Spring Friends School left their small Quaker school with five chaperones and flew to the lush Central American country of Belize for two weeks to work with 30 families in a tiny village called Laguna.

Doug Smith, a biology teacher at the school for 23 years, organized the trip as one of the school's "intersessions," an experience outside the classroom for five to 10 days that coincides with spring break. "One of the greatest outcomes was the group experience, learning how to work with each other," Smith said.

The journey began with one night in Belize City and then an all-day bus ride down a dirt road to Laguna. In the village, the students joined their host families. Because Belize was once a British colony, most of the villagers speak English as well as their local Kekchi language.

"A tourist goes in and looks. We got involved. I got to teach!" exclaimed Sarah Arnould, a freshman and the youngest of the group. "There was so much freedom. They let us be adults and learn whatever there was to do. We never would have been allowed to do this in the States."

After dinner each night, the stu-



BY GARRY FOGEL—THE WASHINGTON POST

dents gathered to share their experiences. "Someone would announce that their host family was going to chop bush or to fix a thatched roof in the morning and anyone was welcome to join. The choices were made by the students," Smith recalled.

"We tried to chop bush but found it was too difficult. The Kekchi could also stand upright and drop

seeds into holes, but we had to stoop and then only lasted as long as our backs," Smith conceded.

"My family was very patient," said Lisa Davis, a sophomore, with a grimace. "I couldn't make tortillas. They'd make six and I'd still be on my one. They'd say, 'Good.' And then proceed to fix it."

Davis's experience was not all smooth. She got an infected bug bite and spent two days in the hospital. Smith recalled that Davis told him at the time, "Even if I had known I'd be this sick, I still would have come down here."

Eating was a daily drama. "You want chicken? Chop!" Davis explained, slicing the air with her hand. "They'd chase the chicken, kill it, and then we'd eat it." Some of the students learned to catch fish by casting nets.

One of the villagers offered to give the students his daughter's pet 315-pound pig, the pride of the village. Although hesitant, the students accepted the offer but insisted on paying.

"The daughter, who had raised the pig, was upset, and we felt bad about that," Smith said. "But, as the pig roast became an all-day communal event, the daughter joined in. In many ways, it reminded me of a Midwest church social."

Most of the group said they cried upon their return home, and all planned to correspond with their families.

Carrie Mallino, a junior, remembered, "When we said goodbye, my host mother said, 'Tomorrow, I will cry because I will be alone. You will be gone.'"