

Erika Marte



“...I knew the only thing that kept me from succeeding and overcoming challenges was me.”

**—Erika,
New Zealand, 2010**

Hometown: Bronx, NY

Community-Based Partner Program: Summer Search

Faces of America Destination: New Zealand, summer 2010

What were some of the most memorable experiences during your AFS program?

I stayed with a host family during my last four weeks and did community service with my host dad at an organization called Te Whanau Katahi (Family Together in Maori). I visited disabled kids that the psychologist worked with. A young girl named Ocean (who had Down syndrome, speech impairments and multiple foot and eye surgeries) was the sweetest girl ever. I remember her taking off my glasses, looking at me as if examining me and then giving me a kiss on the cheek. I played games with her and she was so clever. People don't usually get this type of opportunity and I was thrilled I did. It was truly an eye opening experience.

My group of friends was definitely unique and made the trip worthwhile. I remember tears rolling down my cheeks, not because of sadness, but because I laughed so hard and so much. They say those who laugh more live longer and if that is true then this trip has added 20 years to my lifespan.

I also remember our first overnight camping trip. It had rained the previous day and there were huge puddles of water on the trails and overflowing rivers; the only thing getting in the way of our campsite was an hour of trail that was steep and muddy. You'd think we were ready to give up but instead we created our own game; mud surfing. I enjoyed every single minute of it. My time spent camping in New Zealand is unforgettable because it was one of the first times everyone just let their guard down and showed who they really were.

In what ways did your AFS experience challenge you?

I had many firsts on my trip. I went skiing, rappelling off a mountain, zip-lining, canoeing in the cold for four days straight and white water rafting, all for the first time. First times are always a challenge because you really don't know what to expect and yet I tried them anyway. One of my instructors always said “what the mind conceives the body will achieve.” I heard his voice say that over and over again when I had to face those challenges and when I have to face challenges now. It's amazing when you achieve things that seemed impossible, and it feels so good. During my time in New Zealand with the *Faces of America* program, I pushed myself because I knew the only thing that kept me from succeeding and overcoming challenges was me. Knowing this made me stronger.

How has your experience as an AFS-USA *Faces of America* scholar changed you and your view of the world?

Every day of the 49 days that I was away from home taught me something about myself. Every day I felt different and stronger. While I do notice the barriers in this world, I decide not to dwell on them and to instead look for the opportunities. At first I couldn't imagine going to New Zealand and creating this wonderful memory, and now I can't imagine myself without it. I am truly thankful and sincerely grateful for the magnificent opportunity I was given through the AFS-USA *Faces of America* program.