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## Arts teacher taking expertise to Nicaragua

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By [TIM WAGNER](#) STAFF WRITER

Compelled by so many inspirational stories throughout her life -- many from those that touched her own -- Somphonh "Sam" Oulavong couldn't wait to grow up.

Until she was 6 years old, Oulavong and her family lived in refugee camps in Laos and Thailand, where they received food rations and vaccinations.

In 1981, her parents moved to Rockford, where she spent the majority of her childhood and adolescence living on welfare, sheepishly accepting hand-me-downs, waiting up to two years to see a dentist.

"I remember being ashamed and embarrassed," Oulavong says, "because my lunch ticket was a different color."

Despite her childhood shortcomings, Oulavong always steered her life toward education -- a safe haven in an otherwise challenging environment.

An art teacher at Washington Middle School, where she teaches graphics, photography and digital art, Oulavong is taking her expertise some 2,000 miles from Aurora. She leaves Saturday for Nicaragua, where she will live in one of the most ravaged Third-World countries for six weeks, teaching children the art of photography.

"I want a child to look up to me and just be inspired, and to feel like they can be something and make their life better," Oulavong says. "We don't have to be victims of our own environment."

Oulavong will be working with Empowerment International, a non-profit organization which gives more than 300 children in Costa Rica and Nicaragua access to education. Its mission statement is "to break the cycle of poverty before it is transferred to yet another generation, by building more educated and productive communities."

While traveling abroad two years ago, Oulavong met the person who offered this different path, the next chapter in her life.

Waiting at the airport in Milan, Italy, Oulavong chatted with Kathy Adams, founder and executive director of Empowerment International. The two remained in touch, and Adams encouraged Oulavong to teach in Nicaragua for the summer.

During winter break, Oulavong contemplated traveling to Thailand or Italy to study painting, before Adams called and again invited her to be part of her team.

Inspired by peers who went to New Orleans after Hurricane Katrina, the 32-year-old teacher is paying for every penny of the trip.

"I wanted to use my talents and passion to reach out to kids, too," Oulavong said. "Everything just felt so right."

Oulavong in February won a grant from Best Buy, allowing her to take digital cameras and Web cams, so the Nicaraguan children can communicate with their sponsors here in the U.S. She'll use the children's work as teaching tools for her own students next school year.

And during her stay, Oulavong will complete a series of photo essays based on the lives of the people she'll teach, as part of an Independent Study course at Waubensee Community College.

"In my photos, I want to show the beauty of Nicaragua," she says. "There is such a negative portrayal of the country, but there is truly more beauty there than what people are showing. There is a richness within the culture."

In the next breath, Oulavong acknowledged she'll be living in a volatile environment.

"It's dawned on me that I'm not going to a place of comfort," Oulavong says. "But I'm putting myself in a situation that is very close to my childhood."

"And I'm pretty sure the reward I get at the end will be worth it."

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