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A labour of love: Orphanage work in Ecuador 'changed my life,' says Trojans' Raslask

CALGARY — For two weeks, now, Carly Raslask has been settling in back at SAIT Polytechnic, cracking open the books in class and patrolling the pitch as a member of the SAIT Trojans women's soccer team.

But for Raslask, the mind tends to drift these days. She only arrived back in Canada on Sept. 6 after spending a wonderful, enriching, heartbreaking 10 weeks caring for children at an orphanage in Quito, Ecuador. And, in many ways, she feels like she left a big piece of her heart back in South America.

"I still think of them as my own kids. There was one baby girl there named Angie, who was six months old . . . everyone called her my daughter," says Raslask, 20. "I came to think of them as my own, and grew to love them. It was the coolest experience . . . and it changed my life."

Raslask (1st year, Lethbridge, Alta., diagnostic medical sonography), who's in her second year of studies at SAIT, was convinced by a friend to sign up as an orphanage volunteer in Ecuador this past summer, because "it's all she ever talked about, I've always wanted to do volunteer work, and this was my last free summer before I graduate."

She made contact with the Orphanage Support Services Organization, secured financial support from local businesses for her plane ticket, and brushed up on her Spanish, having been to Spain as a high-school exchange student.

Privacy rules prevent Raslask from mentioning the name or the location of the orphanage, but she helped to look after about five dozen youngsters, from newborns on up — showering them with the affection and attention children need to form loving relationships, and avoid poor emotional, intellectual, and physical development.

"Every morning, we'd wake up the kids, bathe them, clothe them, feed them," she says.

"We'd do therapies with them on a weekly basis — teach them about colours, animals, numbers, so they didn't fall behind other kids."





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Raslask and the Trojans (1-3-0) face a tall task in their lone assignment this week — a showdown on Saturday, Sept. 25 with the Mount Royal University Cougars (3-0), last year's Alberta Colleges Athletic Conference silver medalists. The action begins at 12 p.m. on SAIT's Martin Cohos Commons Field.

Trojans apprentice coach Erin Schwab has noted the influence of another sport — rugby — in Raslask's play from the defender's position. Raslask was a member of Alberta provincial U-17 and U-19 teams as a starting flanker, and red-shirted for the University of Lethbridge Pronghorns when they won the Canadian Interuniversity Sport (CIS) national women's rugby title in the fall of 2008.

"She's very physical," says Schwab of the five-foot-three Raslask. "She just runs right through the ball, through the players. She brings that momentum with her.

"Physically, she's a strong player to have out on the field. It's good to have her knock around their forwards."

Notes Raslask: "Yeah, I guess I am a little more aggressive. I have to remember that it's soccer I'm playing now. Fitness definitely crosses over; I just need to work on my ball skills."

If she could relive one day in her life, Raslask says it would be her final day with her kids in Quito. While a career as an ultrasound technician awaits, she's already counting the days until she can return for another volunteer's tour of duty.

"Yeah. For sure. I'd love to go back," she says. "I miss the kids. Every day, I miss it."

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