Without warning, the little girl sitting in front of me in her pre-school sized blue plastic school chair gives a start, snaps her head to the right toward the knee-height education table, and dives underneath it, mid-song. I groan audibly and sink down in my own, quite unsuitably sized, pre-school chair, putting a hand over my eyes. This is the third time this week, and it’s only Tuesday.

I’m in rural western Honduras and it’s 7:30 in the morning. The sweat is already running in tiny rivers under my T-shirt and my ankle-length jeans feel sticky. I’ve learned to wear them, though; it’s a better alternative than the mosquito bites that covered my calves and shins in my first weeks here.

This is the beginning of my school day and I’m with my first, at times most challenging, student. Her name is Natali. She’s the height and build of a 6-year-old but she’s 13. No one really knows what caused the growth problem or if it’s related to her cognitive delays. Her speech is limited and lisped, she’s a slow learner, and her behavior includes these sudden mood swings.

I work with her one-on-one for two hours each morning. Later in the day I’ll teach library classes and first grade English and math. The days are long and exhausting and this one is not exactly off to a great start.

I slowly, wearily bend to look under the table. Her brown eyes meet mine, and I see in them that we’re in full-fledged defiance mode. I glance up at the wall: the fan. I left it on, foolishly hoping she wouldn’t notice. It’s one of her triggers.

I spent last year as a volunteer with a home for abused and abandoned children in Honduras called Amigos de Jesús. I left the summer after my graduation from CUA not completely ignorant of the fact that I would be forever changed by the experience, but certainly ignorant of the ways in which I would be altered.

Many children at that home left an indelible mark on me. Their stories of trauma opened my eyes to a world of pain; their resilience opened my eyes to a world of human strength; their love opened my heart in ways I didn’t think possible. But Natali holds her own special place.

Who are the people who most influence us? Are they the ones who teach us? The ones who give us skills and knowledge? Or who draw out of us knowledge of ourselves? If the latter, then Natali influenced me. I discovered in myself anger and frustration I didn’t know I had. I learned humility and self-acceptance, and to carry both joyfully, like she does. If anyone is skilled in the art of self-acceptance, it’s Natali.

I think those who influence us most, though, are the ones we love. The ones who pull love out of us, bit by excruciating, exhilarating bit. Because to love is our meaning and desire as human beings.

As often as Natali would throw a tantrum in morning classes she would come find me in the cafeteria at dinner time. I would be sitting at one of the wooden tables with some of the other children, eating a plate of beans, rice, and eggs, when I would feel a tug at the back of my shirt, and there would be Natali, eye-level, saying just my name, “Miss Joanna,” in her peculiar monotone.

I would scoot over and she would hoist herself up on the bench next to me, leaning her head against my side while I would try to get her to talk or make her laugh, tickling her until she threw her head back in giggles.

Sometime we would sit together until the meal had ended. At some point she would crawl up into my lap and we would laugh together, until one of the caretakers came up to tell her it was time to go back to her room. She would walk out with her lopsided stride, head tilted to one side or the other looking upward, pausing to smile her crooked smile back at me.

The morning was long forgotten. Let her throw all the tantrums in the world. It was worth the privilege of her love.

Joanna Gardner graduated from CUA’s honors program in 2013 with a degree in English. She returned from her year of service this past summer and now works as the social ministries communicator for the New Jersey Diocese of Camden and Catholic Charities.