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Final Reporting- Internship Evaluation

Take a moment to reflect on the preconceived notions of Latin America lingering in your imagination. What comes to mind? Poverty? Machismo? Tacos? Now pick a country. Let's say...Guatemala. Now what comes to mind? Even more poverty? Indigenous people? Bananas? Whatever thoughts may arise, more than likely, they only complete a small fraction of Guatemala's small presence in Latin America. After three and a half months of living there, I have come to understand that the roots of this country are much deeper than any one person could ever conceive. Yes, bananas, poverty and indigenous people do play a significant role in Guatemalan culture, however, these elements intertwine meticulously to create a web of the most remarkably diverse and peculiar country I have ever encountered.

The rich, living indigenous cultures are scattered over thousands of miles from 11,000 feet in barren mountainous ranges to coastal tropics. Horrific memories of civil war clandestinely loiter in the adult minds of Guatemalans and even Rigoberta Menchu's sad account cannot fully depict what atrocities were encountered over the past five decades. One could not possibly taste the numerous varieties of uses for corn or ever carry themselves fully conscious after a swig of the local *guaro*. Politics are so corrupt from the village level to the national that not even the most honest, charitable man or woman could generate a country-wide change. The war of Catholicism against Mayan traditionalists and their ancient spirituality wanes as Jesus Christ makes his way into the hearts of many. These are just a few of the intricacies that complete the curiosities of Guatemalan life. Never did I encounter a moment of satiation for this Central American culture I emerged into and little did I know how intensely I would be affected by its extensive limbs of ethos upon returning to my Oregon community.

On January 6th, I arrived in Guatemala. The bus dropped me off at a dusty crossroads with my small orange backpack and some simple directions that I had memorized the previous day; "tell the taxi driver Mateo or Chimiya" was the site coordinator's emailed response. The sun was just escaping behind the corn fields but a trace of the sun's warmth still lingered. Immediately a taxi appeared and my heart sunk. I would have liked to stay there, on that dust-ridden road, soaking in this new community I was about to join. Never before had I seen such exquisitely designed clothes, wide toothless grins, or human beings sauntering about with the ease and tranquility of light streaming through a leafy elm tree.

"Chimiya?"

The taxi driver interrupted my intrigue. I nodded and got in with my backpack on my lap. The road was hazardously bumpy and I wished I hadn't decided against wearing my sports bra that day. No sooner had the thought arose, then we pulled up to a house surrounded in succulents and an unrecognizable pink flowering bush.

“We’re here? This is it?”

“Si.”

I heard loud voices coming from inside, voices speaking English, so I headed towards them. Ten people or so were huddled inside a concrete kitchen and all eyes greeted mine when they saw me. Mateo, the director, exclaimed, “Kirsten, you’re here!” and gave me a strong hug. Casualties were exchanged and by that time the sun had fully set and a ritual traveling fatigue waved through me. I left the group to head up to my temporary bed in the ‘big cabaña’ due to a shortage of rooms in the volunteer housing. Generous amounts of wool blankets were stacked into my arms with a flashlight on top. Making my way up the hill towards the cabaña it was impossible not to be stunned by the vast sky above. Not a trace of extrusion except for the radiating stars. The bulbous moon literally lit the path eliminating any fear I might have felt amidst a blanketing darkness. This was comforting and I realized just how happy I was to be there in Chimiya.

The following three weeks I spent figuring out what kind of role I had at Parque Chimiya. My initial impression, before even setting foot in Guatemala, was that I would be working on an organic farm. Although there was an extensive organic garden area, Mateo’s girlfriend, Cati, seemed to be maintaining the six-terraced swales. I was able to contribute to the garden project sporadically throughout my internship, however, numerous projects around and extending out of the park had greater urgency. Thus, my internship transformed into a continual surprise everyday. I got into the habit of asking Mateo where he foresaw the day leading and worked accordingly. True, I had experience in the gardening sector, but what I discovered as a greater asset in the realm of third world development was adaptability and patience. The transition to this manner of working was relatively smooth, in fact, I appreciated the guidance and looked forward to new projects as a chance to learn something new.

Although Mateo gave the directions each day I soon began to understand his intention was to only set the objective; the rest was up to me and the other volunteers. Perhaps a few words of experience would be given such as, what barriers or quirks to expect from the indigenous culture or maybe where to find the wheelbarrows. These explanations, however, initially left me feeling struck with a sense of inadequacy. I wanted help, someone to show me step-by-step how to accomplish the task. Of course this is the definition of internship but the intimidation of working creatively and independently remained. This feeling of dependency was perhaps the biggest challenge during my internship. To work amongst people who believed in my potential was a new experience and to be given the option of control and vision in the work environment was stimulating. The sense of inadequacy slipped away as I became more comfortable leading my days and seeing some of my ideas become a reality.

This internship has become a defining experience for a personal understanding of myself as well as how I work in a professional setting. Due to living and working under the same roof as my coworkers I am not quite sure whether my personal growth can be

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Without my previous language capacity to communicate in Spanish, I think I would have missed out on many of the opportunities to connect with local people and discover some of the intricacies that mould Guatemalans into who they are. *Poco a poco*, little by little, my language fluency improved and I reaped the benefits of friendships and insightful conversations with locals. Before arriving I had set a goal to befriend a woman from the community. Not only was I curious of how female bonding manifested in an indigenous society but I also feared the lack of intimacy and affection that I might have possibly gone without for three months. Luckily a quick friendship was developed between a store-owner named Fidelia and myself. The time we spent together was inexplicably enriching and I owe a grand part of my happiness in Guatemala to her. Through Fidelia, I was opened up to the possibility of being emotionally close to someone of such a distinctively different background. As I recall, I cannot remember crying so long after leaving a loved one or hurting so much.

As an International Studies major with an emphasis in Latin America and having lived in Central America for over a year, I felt quite secure with transitioning into the Guatemalan life. I expected a level of culture shock and knew there would be hardships ahead of me. I also knew that in the short period of time living there, I would have to fill my days so as not to miss a moment of the rich diverse interactions I was longing for. All of this happened and of course more than I could have imagined. I do not wish I had been more prepared or more knowledgeable to the culture I was entering. Isn't that part of the experience? To be astounded or shocked or curious by all of the unfamiliar elements? It would have been nice to have brought a down jacket for the chilly cloudless nights but once again, being pushed beyond my preconceived limits and living without the material goods I found once necessary, was immeasurably valuable to my growth and indulging in new ways of life.

Tips for future interns:

- Be prepared to live a very communal lifestyle. This includes sharing food, laundry soap, a bathroom, a cold shower, evening activities and in my case, a bed!
- Bring crisp monetary bills to exchange. Banks do not accept bills with even the tiniest

of rips or stains. On the other hand, bills cannot seem too new or they will also reject them. Also, have an extra stash for those days or weeks or even months when the single ATM machine is not in order. In this case, you may have to share money as well, which can be kind of tricky amongst Americans.

- Off work hours could potentially be filled with lots of movie watching for those who are not inventive or do not enjoy spending hours outdoors. Bring a star-gazing guide, lots of books, art supplies and a yoga mat. You'll finally be able to get in all those projects you have always wanted to try.
- Come with an open heart and mind. You just may find some of the best friends of your life and explore what it's like to work in a rural setting. Patience, ingenuity and adjusting will define the experience at Long Way Home.