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Guatemala Report

Long Way Home Internship

My experience in Guatemala was like going to outdoor school. In sixth grade we all went to this camp where we lived in a cabin and learned from our environment. It was not survival training by any means; it was just trying something new. That was Guatemala for me; I was always trying something new. I had interned abroad before which left me with certain expectations for Guatemala. My first international internship was in Mexico. My parents had gone with me and literally walked me to my director's door to make sure that I would arrive safely. My parents did not walk me to the door when I left for Guatemala. This is one of the many differences I experienced when comparing Mexico to Guatemala.

On June 24th Kenny (the other intern from University of Oregon) and I met up in Antigua. Antigua is a bustling tourist town made up of colonial architecture and surrounded by active volcanoes. When Kenny and I finally met up we decided to find our way to this place called "Comalapa." We had not received any instructions on how to get to the town other than some basic information located on the webpage. Kenny and I were pretty excited about the whole adventure and hopped on a bus to Chimaltenango to find our way. I find it is easier to be daring when you are with another person rather than all alone.

When we arrived in Comalapa we wondered around the pueblo to find where "Long Way Home" or "Parque Chimiya" might be located. We really had no idea what to expect so we just started walking in the direction that people had recommended. Keep in

mind Kenny and I were both carrying a huge pack and a normal school backpack. We walked...and walked...and walked until finally we hiked up a hill that had two familiar cabins located on the hill. We had made it!

Since the site director was still in the United States working on fundraising, we the interns were left to make up our own projects. With the help of other volunteers, we began projects in the schools, at the park, and around the community. This may have been one of my biggest challenges throughout my whole “Guatemalan” experience. There was always a project to do but it came down to what I felt most comfortable with and whether my skills were needed or not. We, as interns, needed to find what we wanted to do. The site director was not going to decide what our days looked like, that was our responsibility. It was always for the best. I knew or had to plan what my days would look like while keeping in mind what needed to be done for Long Way Home at the same time.

Every work week was different. Though I had some mandatory engagements every week, there was always something unique about every week. My normal projects consisted of teaching in a third and fourth grade class, playing basketball on Thursdays, and working on the large proposal for LiftKids, and organization interested in building schools in developing countries. Other jobs included planting trees with schools or community members, building a stove for our neighbors, and landscaping work at the park. With these projects, there was always something to do.

When asked whether I thought I was an asset to the organization I tried to think of what skills I brought with me that were most helpful. I really do not think that “skills” is the correct word. I think that being helpful was not in how well I could write proposals or

the level at which I spoke Spanish. I think that being an asset included having an open mind and being flexible. For instance, had I made too many plans or stuck to only what I wanted to work on originally, my experience would not have been as fulfilling.

The guidance that I received was very helpful. I was always given material to read about anything from working in the nonprofit sector to real life situations of how grassroots organizations can succeed in helping people. Where I had been used to structure or certain needs from the director at my other internship, in Guatemala I was given the freedom to pursue projects that most interested me with a few instructions from the director.

Another aspect of my internship was the traveling portion. I learned so much more by getting up and doing. I was allowed the time to travel all over Guatemala and see the sites that interested me most. This was an opportunity to understand Guatemala. By taking just one public bus ride I learned so much about culture, language, and myself. I have a new understanding for “personal space” as well. For instance, I am pretty sure that statement does not exist when you are taking a packed chicken bus, which might even have real chickens on it. Traveling can teach a person so much about themselves. At one point this summer a friend from college and I went to the Caribbean coast to a place called Livingston. That night we had caught a bus to Rio Dulce, where our hostel was located. During the ride the bus driver told us, the two *gringas*, to get out. Next thing we knew we were stranded in a little Guatemalan town without a way to return to our hostel. We ended up finding alternative transportation, but it was still quite the adventure.

Beyond projects and travels there was always a great book to read or a good conversation to have. I lived mostly with the other intern, Kenny, who I got along with

really well. We had conversations about anything from Pacific Northwest microbrews to melting ice caves in Peru to the importance of reading. It was an interesting relationship in that aspect. We always had something to talk about, even if it was just what we were planning to eat for dinner.

I know that this internship has once again changed who I am as a person. My view of the world and my future has been altered, yet again. This is not surprising at all. It is a great thing to have, and experience that I had expected. I assumed that I would come back a little different than the person I was at that time. I have noticed differences in my behavior and in my outlook on life. But really, all of these little differences are good. They are what I wanted from my internship. I cannot imagine leaving Long Way Home as the same person. I do not think it would be possible for me to leave unchanged. It is one of those places that challenges any volunteer to step up and learn. Had I left the internship as the same person, I do believe I would have failed in some aspects.

If future interns are able to read this my main advice is to evaluate who you are as a person. Do not make the internship about the grade or about narrow projects. Make the internship broad and flexible. Go outside your comfort zone to experience something new. Be curious. Be outgoing. There is a lot provided for interns at Long Way Home. It is up to the intern to make it a life-changing experience.