

## Intern Reflection Paper

My internship at Long Way Home was an incredibly unique experience and I am so glad to have found such a place to spend my last ten weeks at. Despite the fact that my first day at Long Way Home was over 10 weeks ago, I can remember the details so vividly, that I can even recall sounds and smells. I flew into Guatemala City and from there I had to take a chicken bus in order to get to the town Long Way Home is located in, San Juan Comalapa. Looking back on my experience on my first chicken bus makes me laugh a bit because of how many times I did the same route, on the same chicken busses, and how confident I became doing that route! As I was switching busses in Chimaltenango, about 30 minutes outside of Comalapa, there was some confusion as to what bus I was supposed to get on, and every bus that passed my way was PACKED! After the ayudante (bus helper) instructed me that my bus was the next one coming up, I felt a little more at ease. As I got onto the overcrowded chicken bus, I saw a young woman in the front seat with a backpack on. I knew there was another girl arriving that day and figured it must be her! Sure enough, she was also headed to Long Way Home! Once I arrived in San Juan Comalapa, I then had to take a tuk-tuk (a little vehicle originating from Thailand) and told the driver “Parque Chimiya.” The young man knew exactly where I was going, as most of the gringos who come through Comalapa are working with Long Way Home. After a VERY bumpy ten-minute ride, I arrived at the park and was greeted by all of the dogs (5), followed by Rebecca, the volunteer coordinator, and the other volunteers and interns who were living there already. We all sat down and received the tour of the park, and went over all that we would be needing to know about living in San Juan Comalapa, and working at Long Way Home. It was a

long exhausting day of travel, and after we all cooked a meal together, got to know each other by the fire, I cozied up in my sleeping bag and prepared for an experience I knew would be life-changing.

My language skills didn't improve quite as much as I had hoped they would, but this is mainly because of the place I chose to live, at the volunteer house. I chose to live at the volunteer house because I wanted to create those bonds that come with communal living. I absolutely loved living at the volunteer house, and because we all realized that it was detrimental to our Spanish only speaking in English, we established a "Spanish hour" every night, where we would only speak in Spanish. This helped my skills immensely and was a great, fun way to practice my Spanish. I also took a Spanish class once a week from a woman in the community. This was really helpful as it helped brush up on a language I hadn't spoken in two years. I also did a home stay for a few weeks, where I was fully immersed in the culture and language. This improved my language skills because I learned some of the sayings that were common to this part of Guatemala, such as "saber" for "I don't know." It was really fun learning these nuances, and then implementing them into my conversations with the local people. I especially enjoyed conversing with people in the community on market days, which were every Tuesday, Friday and Sunday. This was a time when the town square was full of vendors selling local produce, and hand made goods!

Personally along with professionally, this internship really helped me in becoming a better advocate for myself. There were occasionally situations I found myself in, where I had to speak for myself if I wasn't comfortable, and be more confrontational than I am used to. This was extremely necessary because everybody has such a different outlook

and perspective on situations, and something that may make me feel uncomfortable, could be completely fine for another person. I really realized this when a few other volunteers and interns were having an issue with how the director of the program was speaking to us, and his negative attitude. After discussing how to handle the situation for a few days, I decided it would be best to confront him about the way we perceived the conversations. After having a one-on-one discussion with him, I gained more respect from him and understood the comments he was making came from a good, caring place.

I have also gotten better at being more proactive and creating positive ways to get around certain situations, in ways that every party involved is happy with the outcome. An example of this is when I was the only volunteer at the volunteer house. This was not an opportune situation for me because part of coming down to Guatemala and doing this program was to form connections, and this was not happening when I was living alone. To solve this, I did a little bit of problem solving, and figured the best solution would be to ask if I could do another home stay with a family in town.

Professionally I really gained a lot of good insight into how non-profits, specifically in foreign countries are run, and all of the hardships they encounter. Funding was a large issue because grants and donations were the main source of money for Long Way Home. This caused a lot of stress because there is no consistent source of revenue, but it was very exciting when we were given a large donation that a person or organization wanted to donate to something specifically, like money for a roof. I was able to get hands on experience working in the administration department of this non-profit, and helping them with computer work and data entry. Although at times these may have not been the most exciting days at work, they are incredibly crucial to the success of the

organization. I learned that the reason for having to enter the hours worked in every part of the organization (gardening, community outreach, building the vocational school, etc) had to be documented for grants.

Long Way Home had a lot of volunteers constantly coming in and out and I wanted to make sure that my work there was valued, and something important to me as well. For the first week, all of the interns there at the time went and worked on the building of the school, and it took about about a week to find my niche. I wanted to work both on the construction site, but also learn more about the interworkings of development work. I spoke with my supervisor and asked what kinds of projects were needed, in which I could learn these different aspects. I created a program evaluation, did research on the current education system in Guatemala, and helped with general administration work. I also worked in the gardens, specifically the Vivero, which is the nursery, where we took cuttings from plants in the garden, and those will be used at the vocational school. My supervisor was Genevieve, since I was mostly working with her in the office, although the weeks I spent working on the vocational school, my supervisor was Aaron.

A typical day at Long Way Home is hard to say because of how much each day differed, and how new worlds could be revealed in a single 24-hour period. The work day at Long Way Home would start at 7:30 a.m. so I would typically wake up around 6:30 to make some coffee on the gas stove, cowboy coffee as we called it, made by boiling water and then putting coffee through a strainer. If there weren't already eggs in the kitchen, somebody would walk up to the local "tienda" to get some fresh eggs and bread for breakfast. After breakfast, everyone would separate and go to their respective work

places for the day. If I were working at the park, my day would look quite different than days I was working at Paxan, where we were working on building the vocational school using tires and trash bottles. At 10:15 a.m. everybody in Guatemala takes a break called “refaxion”, and takes a 15-minute break to have a snack. After that, it is back to work until noon, when we take an hour lunch. During lunch, I would either bring something from the volunteer house to make, usually something along the lines of rice and beans, or pasta, and prepare that up at the work site. On market days, Tuesday, Friday, and Sunday, we would spend the lunch hour in town getting fresh food from the market. After a hard, rewarding 8-hour day, we would make food, build a fire, and sit around and really get to know the other people we were working and living with.

I went to Guatemala with a very open mind, and the only thing I can really think of, on the topic of “what I wish I knew before I went” was that it gets REALLY cold at night! Although I knew I was going to be living in the highlands, I didn’t think that it would get as cold as it did, especially at night. I am glad I was really well prepared and had brought a sleeping bag and some warm clothes. Although I was able to buy whatever I needed from the local Paca’s, which were the second hand stores that had some pretty awesome clothes for only 2 dollars!

My impression of the country changed over the course of my time there significantly. I had some knowledge of the civil war that ended in 1996, however I really got to see first hand a country in the rebuilding phase, which was a really interesting experience. I was really fascinated by how proud everyone is to be Guatemalan, and everyone took such pride in the towns they were from, and lived in. In the town of Todos Santos, they are so proud, that every male in the town wears identical outfits. They have

pin striped red pants, with a different pattern pin stripe shirt, and incredible embroidery work on the collar. When I would see someone wearing this shirt outside of the town Todos Santos, I immediately knew where that shirt originated.

I have gained such an incredibly different perspective on the world after living and working at Long Way Home in San Juan Comalapa. I was able to take the time, and ask myself what I wanted to do personally and professionally in the next chapter of my life. The work at Long Way Home was so dynamic, and I gained so many new tools that I will be able to carry with me in my next endeavors. The people I met and worked with, the Guatemalans who were so welcoming to me, and all of the interns and volunteers taught me how to be gracious, welcome people with open arms, and not pass any judgments. I am so grateful I found Long Way Home as a site to complete my internship at, and have the opportunity to work on such an incredible project.