

MESE Final Report

MESE is a wonderful, wonderful organization, full of love and life and genuine caring. I have worked with numerous non-profits in the US, but have never encountered the mixture of camaraderie, informality, and openness that exists in the MESE office. It is like a combination coffee shop, social club, office environment, crisis center, and community headquarters all in one. My experience with the staff and clients changed forever the way I see non-profit work and management.

My first day walking in to the “office”, which is actually a donated house structure, I was struck by the forwardness and assertiveness of the employees. Everything is out in the open at MESE, both relating to personal and professional concerns. There are four social workers, a supervisor, two psychologists, and two management staff (all women), and when someone has a relationship problem, a tummy ache, a new pair of shoes, or a client with special needs, EVERYBODY knows. MESE is a family as well as a work-oriented team. Anyone can straight-up share anything with everyone else. The social workers are co-workers, best friends, and surrogate moms to each others’ children. In this way, there was a great sense of trust and team-work.

Records of clients and their situations are also not confidential. I was able to read up on any child at any time without permission, which actually proved helpful. It was not infrequent for teens or mothers to show up at the office with serious concerns about physical or sexual abuse and discuss those concerns openly in the general kitchen area with whomever was around. Mothers will also readily tell you (sometimes untruthfully) all about their financial, emotional, familial, and personal issues. It was difficult at times to decipher what was being exaggerated, minimized, or invented, and thus what was of immediate concern, but the social workers know the families and communities well, and maintain the focus on the welfare of the kids.

Informal vs. formal work expectations were a little unclear at first. Your daily work dress will be jeans and a blouse and sweater. Bring comfy shoes, including tennies, as you will be walking quite a bit. But also bring a little flashy formal outfit for events. You don’t punch a time card and work schedules vary by the activities and needs of

clients. I was told, for example, to arrive at 9 AM because the workers generally make visits to families starting at 9:30. But when I arrived, everyone was just sitting around gossiping and looking at a mail-order catalog. Yes, we did make visits almost every day to colonies, but people leave when they want to, they create their own schedule, and often intersperse work with leisure activities (ex. going shopping for hair clips or groceries on the way to the bus). This proved difficult for me as I was not sure how much leeway I had to design my own schedule. All of the employees are actually very hard workers and dedicated to doing whatever needs to be done to fulfill their job duties, including working nights and weekends; it's just that when the proscribed job duties are few or finished, they feel free to take care of personal interests.

There is also a lot of sitting around. A lot. That's more Mexico than just MESE, though. It can start when you arrive at the office at 9AM and the doors are locked and no one is around and you don't know why, so you just sit and wait for someone to arrive. Once you get inside the office, you will get ready to leave and do home or school visits, and then sit in a very small bus called a combi (actually a converted VW bus) for 30-45 minutes as you travel to the colonia. Then you knock on doors and hope to find people home, or wait for them to get home, and observe the social workers interviewing and checking up on the families. Then back on the combi to ride back to the office. In the office, you can do as you wish, but you will probably need to program what that is and discipline yourself. The whole day, starting at 9 and ending at 2:30-ish can involve very little actual "work time".

I also spent many hours planning a curriculum for classes to which no one showed up. This will happen. You will set up appointments and have no-shows. You will go to events and wait 2 hours for them to start. Go anyway, plan anyway, and try to accept that you have no control over what happens on the other end. It's kind of like being on the Space Mountain ride in Disneyland. You really have no idea what's coming up next, you can't predict anything, and that is where the fun and creativity come in.

Taking this informality as an advantage, your days can be extraordinarily productive personally or professionally as you choose. In my interim moments I read Spanish psychology texts, I talked with the other workers and asked a million questions about culture, customs, familial situations, conjugated verbs in my head, marveled at the

landscape, or brainstormed potential projects for our clientele. New and interesting stimuli are never lacking. For the first couple of weeks just relax and take it all in. Then you will have to choose/create a project for the rest of your time with MESE. It can be almost anything you are inspired to do, but you will want to ask what the immediate needs of the organization are, as well.

My biggest roadblock while working at MESE was my language ability. I took a month of classes before commencing work, but still could only understand 50% of what was going on in the office or with clients. Because I felt passionate about learning from and communicating with the families, I was continually frustrated by not being able to understand their situations. I wanted to help, but felt limited to offering English classes, instead of doing counseling or interviews. My skills did improve over the course of the internship, but I highly recommend doing as much language preparation as possible before starting. I ended up having to nod and smile a lot and let go of understanding everything all of the time, but when I had energy and curiosity, I would always ask that the speaker repeat what she had just said, slow down, or explain more. I found that Morelians love to be helpful, and will probably be more than happy to help you understand what they are saying.

Besides language, there were a few logistical bumps working at MESE: 1) **Water**, sometimes there is none and you cannot use the toilets. Go before you leave the office; 2) **Money**, be prepared to buy water and beverages and possibly spend \$2-3 a day on combi rides, and bring extra for Murphy's Law which seems to be particularly active in Mexico; 3) **Cell Phone**, easy to buy there, you will probably want one if you make local friends, or if you live far from MESE; 4) **Time**, a 6:30 coffee date usually means 7 or 7:30, but it depends on the people involved, so it's always best to show up on time.

An important cultural rule-of-thumb is sharing. More than your mommy taught you in pre-school, Morelians share everything. If someone has a bag of chips, he offers a chip to everyone around, even if this leaves him with only crumbs. When a Morelian has a pen/torilla/cigarette/automobile that someone else needs or wants, chances are they will offer it up. In this way, I acquired a cell phone, a guitar, and a place to live! But sharing is a mutual activity, so I also offered massages, Chinese cuisine, or free English lessons when I could. There is no way to predict what a particular person will or will not

share, so don't assume that because your host house has a piano that you can play it, even though your family might have offered you access to everything in the house. I found the safest practice to maintain courtesy is to *always ask* before using, eating, or expecting anything, and if you have a Twinkie, offer it around.

In addition to cultural and personal enrichment, this internship helped me clarify some professional values and directions. Going into this internship, I knew I wanted to be involved in social services, but I didn't know in what capacity. Because my major was Psychology at the U of O (and because the educational system is different in Mexico), I was often mistaken as a fully-trained professional, ready-to-act Drug Counselor, Marriage and Family Therapist, or Behavior Management Specialist. I was even offered a job as full-time psychologist for an elementary school! Yet I felt like I knew nothing at all about kids, was never trained in clinical evaluation, and had it not been for personal experience in therapy, I would never have been able to conduct any sort of psychological services. As it was, my language ability was not developed enough to act as a Psychologist, so I usually had to respectfully decline, anyway. But I did find that I really enjoy working with teenagers and would like to do more one-on-one with them in the future.

I still don't know exactly what career path I will take, but MESE gave me ample freedom to explore a lot of different responsibilities. I learned that I am really good at brainstorming and preparing curriculum for courses or workshops, but not so stellar at running the actual classes. I am also a very skilled miner of resources and connections and enjoy innovating programs or setting up unique opportunities for youth. Through working in a different language, I got to hone my listening skills and appreciated the teamwork and flexibility of MESE. This internship helped me identify what skills I have, which ones I want to develop, and someday soon, once I have gained more fluency in Spanish, I would love to return to work again with MESE.

FAMILY and HOUSING STUFF

I had the unique opportunity to live in 4 different homes over the course of my

term in Morelia. The first was through CCL (the language school), for which I paid \$22/day, everything included. The second and third were with local Rotarian families and were free because of the club's support of MESE. My final home and resting place was with a Mexican friend I met in Morelia whereby we shared a house, each paying approximately \$7/day, everything included.

Before you choose your housing situation, meditate on what you want to include in your life in Morelia. If finances are of concern, CCL families are a relatively pricey way to go for 3 months. On the other hand, they are always centrally located (walk to work around the corner), you always get your own room, and the families are used to hosting foreigners and tend to pay due attention to your interests and needs. I loved my CCL family and visited them even after I was no longer living there!

Rotarian families tend to live farther out of town, so you will need to take a combi in and out of work and if you want to see a movie in the evening, a cab will be necessary to get home. I ran into problems with some of the rules in the Rotary households when I wanted to stay in town for lunch or stay over at a friend's instead of traveling back to out the house and then back to the center of town.

Rotarian families are, as one could surmise from the fact that they are members of a due-paying charitable foundation, more wealthy than most other Morelians. Instead of the more traditional Mexican mom cooks and cleans while dad goes to work, they seem to be more in that transitional phase that America went through in the 80's and 90's. Both parents work, the family eats out more than cooking from scratch, they have internet and household help. But the woman still usually retains some additional assumed duties such as serving food, preparing kids for school, washing dishes, etc. In most cases, the families maintain such a strong sense of gendered duties whereby if the father wants ketchup and it's not on the table, he will tell the wife to get up from her meal and get it for him instead of reaching in the fridge himself. The mother is queen of the kitchen, calls all the shots in that domain, but part of her duty is pleasing the others in the household. This is typical of Mexico as traditional cultural roles and values mix with modern ones. Don't be surprised if the mother seems to be scrambling to work, cook, clean, take care of the kids, volunteer for Rotary, and keep you happy, while the father watches soccer on TV.

One last note on Rotarian families: when I went, there were no regulations fixed, so you might not have your own room or regular meals, and some families might not be used to having a college-aged foreigner in their home (I had a 9pm curfew again for the first time in 15 years!). That said, they are very generous and will try to make you feel comfortable and included in family life.

The third option, somewhere in-between the other two financially, is going out on your own to find a place. I only recommend this if you have already made Mexican friends who can advise and/or accompany you. This ended up being the ideal situation for me because I wanted to have the freedom to bring friends over for lunch, practice my guitar, hang out late at night, cook for fun, decorate my room, and not feel like I was imposing on anyone. The downside can be that you don't have a family to be a part of, to ask questions of, or to take you around and invite you to events. For me, this was not a problem because I had a family of friends in my home which included my roommate, our friends, the landlady, and the cleaning lady, and all of us hung out together every day. However, if you don't already have friends or are not up to proactively exploring Morelia and its culture, you could find yourself a bit lonely and missing out.

All that said, here are some general recommendations for whatever housing situation you find yourself in, especially in the case of Rotary placement:

1. I don't recommend jumping around as much as I did, unless you are particularly comfortable with change and adjustment. I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to observe 4 distinctly different styles of Mexican home life, but it was tiring and distracted my energy from work.
2. Ask for the *specific* combi which will take you to work and back. Remember combis stop running around 9:30 PM. When the combi driver stops to pick you up, ask again to make sure he is going in your direction.
3. Ask for rules and preferences your first day.
 - Do you need to come home for lunch every day? What time?
 - Can you have friends over?
 - What does the family do on weekends?
 - Do you have a curfew?
 - Are you all in agreement as to how long you will be staying with them?
4. Whatever the living situation,

weird and different in every arena of your life while in Mexico, but the weirdness usually settles down after a couple of weeks (my curfew quickly relaxed, for example). If you can maintain a sense of interest, observation, and appreciation, you will be a much happier guest.

General Tips for Future Explorers

(Monica Pigeon probably has some useful amendments)

* SAY, “YES!” Morelia has a heck of a lot of cultural activities and people who would love to exchange language practice, offer you opportunities, invite you to lunch, or donate to you their left kidney just because you are a special commodity: a foreigner who wants to get to know Morelia. If you have the time, and are getting a genuinely good vibe from the person (and it is not their kidney they are offering), accept! This is especially important in MESE, as families will offer you their last tortilla and the rudest thing you can do is feel sorry for them and reject their gift. Everything is possible in Mexico, but you only find out by being open...

* BE FLEXIBLE

* IF YOU DON'T KNOW, ASK

* OBSERVE WITHOUT JUDGEING

* LAUGH

* FORGIVE YOURSELF FOR MAKING LINGUISTIC AND CULTURAL FAUX PAS.

*DON'T BE SHY. CLIENTS WILL LOVE TALKING TO AND SHARING WITH YOU!

* SAY, “THANK YOU!” Saying thank you with time, energy, words, flowers, photos, or mutual exchange shows that you are grateful for whatever was offered. Nothing seems to make a Morelian more happy than knowing that their mole made your day ☺.