Desarrollos Costa Rica Sustainable Communities: Strengthening Educational Systems Through Collaborative Community Research and Intervention

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Initial Community Evaluation of Chomes, Puntarenas

In June 2017, the Duke Desarrollos team of Nicole Garcia Fischer, Rachel Gallegos, and Emile Riachi completed a community evaluation of the town of Chomes, Puntarenas, using a variety of community perspectives, in order to provide recommendations for future projects and collaboration with Chomes and Desarrollos. Some of the key findings of their report include challenges of the educational system, such as, a general short-term mentality, lack of opportunities to continue education, lack of healthy activities for youth, and an intergenerational gap between the youth and the older members of the community. Based off of these observations, the Desarrollos team suggested the idea of a vacation camp for children, modeled off of Professor Fernandez’s camp in Taras, Cartago, Campamento Sonrisas. A vacation camp would provide the youth of the community with safe, healthy, productive, structured, and entertaining activities. It would also provide them with an incentive to learn English more formally, as bilingualism is a core value of the camp, accomplished through interaction with and instruction by the visiting student volunteers.

Campamento Sonrisas 2019

Desarrollos spent their first week in Taras volunteering and learning the ideology and logistical structure of a vacation camp in Costa Rica. Our key observations were the vitality of local leadership within the camp, the centrality of family in Costa Rican culture, and the sustainability of the camp through previous campers filling leadership roles. On the last day of camp, the families of the campers were invited to view the children’s art projects, choreography, and written work. Including the families not only enhances the children’s experience, yet also anchors the camp within the community. Sustainability is also crucial for this type of project. Making the transition from camper to leader is not only encouraged, but necessary for the continuation of the camp. With this model, a vacation camp in Chomes could be sustained without the main support of Desarrollos in the future.

Chomes Camp 2020

Duke Desarrollos spent three weeks in Chomes planning and coordinating for the upcoming vacation camp, through focus groups, interviews, and observation of the school system, specifically the elementary school Nora Maria. Through complete immersion in the school environment and collaboration with local leaders, we developed a culturally competent framework for the camp targeting the needs of the community. During their two-week vacation in July, many children do not leave Chomes, a place with few healthy and productive activities. Thus, the goals of the camp are to provide safe and structured activities, offer an incentive to learn English beyond a basic level through bilingual activities, encourage the children to develop long-term goals, provide leadership opportunities for older children, and develop interpersonal skills such as collaboration and compromise. This camp will not only satiate essential academic requests of the teachers and leaders of the Women’s Association by implementing an additional resource for English learning; but also, it will provide the children with one-on-one experiences with university students who will encourage them to plan for their future beyond Chomes. Overall, many community members have expressed their concern that Chomes is “a town forgotten” and Desarrollos hopes to provide a space for the youth in which they can feel safe, acknowledged, and supported, while developing emotionally, socially, and intellectually.