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DUCIGS Field Report

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I spent eight weeks this summer living in Quito, Ecuador and volunteering for a reproductive health non-governmental organization (NGO) called El Centro Médico de Orientación y Planificación Familiar (CEMOPLAF). Going into the experience, I hoped to help CEMOPLAF work toward their mission of reducing unplanned pregnancy and sexually transmitted infection (STI) rates among adolescents, ages 13-19. I did not know exactly where I would be placed or what work I would be doing outside of the research project I had already designed. My project aimed to evaluate the effectiveness of CEMOPLAF's Adolescent Program, the part of the organization specifically dedicated to informing adolescents of their rights and using peer-to-peer education models to meet their unique needs.

Once I arrived at my research site, I found that I would have more time than I expected to volunteer at the organization beyond completing my research. I was specifically assigned to work with Youth Health Promoters—students ages 13-19 who participate in trainings by CEMOPLAF and then disseminate sexual health information to their peers and connect them with resources. Most of my work involved interacting with adolescents directly: leading with and assisting educational workshops, administering surveys and interviewing adolescents, and assessing pre-existing knowledge and welcoming in new Youth Health Promoters.

Once I realized how much time I was going to get to spend with the adolescents, as opposed to working mainly in the NGO's administrative offices, I knew I would have a unique opportunity to get to know the challenges and benefits of peer-based sexual health education, especially in the unique Ecuadorian context. I decided to focus my time on getting to know some of the Youth Health Promoters, assessing their needs, and working to ensure that CEMOPLAF would be able to implement changes to their program in order to meet these needs.

The surveys and interviews became only one small part of my overall experience; most of what I learned came from the organic interactions and conversations with the adolescents, when they became comfortable and trusting enough with me to share their experiences. In the final weeks of my time in Quito, after analyzing my data, I presented it to CEMOPLAF staff and helped them strategize to implement some changes, mainly those suggested by the Youth Health Promoters, which could benefit the program.

I learned to slow down and take life at the Ecuadorian pace, not rushing to pack a million things into one day. I became more comfortable speaking Spanish, an absolutely essential element to being able to communicate daily. Nonetheless, I also became very critical of whether I was doing the best work that I could. I saw other Ecuadorian interns and staff members doing similar work to mine, going through training more quickly, and relating better to the adolescents. They seemed to fit in at the NGO immediately, whereas I took a few weeks of training just to get my bearings and begin to feel comfortable there.

I spent a lot of my time wondering whether going to Quito was the best thing I could have done with my summer. I ultimately decided that I might have been able to have more of an impact at an organization somewhere else—especially in the United States—and that CEMOPLAF might have benefitted more if I had just sent funding

directly to the Adolescent Program and toward hiring more local interns. Nonetheless, I learned an immense amount from my time in Ecuador, which I certainly could not have accomplished by staying at home. I challenged myself in ways I never expected and found a renewed passion for working in sexual and reproductive health and rights. Most importantly, I gained a new understanding of the importance of international partnerships between funding organizations and local NGOs working on the ground in their own communities. Though I did not single-handedly improve reproductive healthcare in Quito, my life was undoubtedly changed and inspired by my time there.