

DUCIGS Follow-Up Report:

By Lissa Neira

This summer was the first time I had ever left North America for such an extended period of time. I spent five weeks in a very small town in Honduras called Camasca with my beloved Project HEAL team members. This year was also the first year that Project HEAL has gone to Camasca, Intibucá because in the past we normally went to the Cangrejal River Valley region. Not knowing what this new region would bring us and never having left an English-speaking country for so long, I was admittedly quite nervous about going to Honduras. It didn't help also that it had one of the highest murder rates in the world and has an official Travel Warning by the Department of State. Nevertheless I packed with extreme caution.

We arrived in San Pedro Sula, one of the most dangerous cities in Honduras and I remember that was the only thing I could think of when we arrived. At that point my heart was pounding like crazy. However, I couldn't help but crack a smile when I saw the bus our NGO sent us. It looked like one of those 1970's retro buses painted white and blue (the national colors of Honduras). The guide hopped off happily and introduced himself. His name was Edman and he later became such a good friend to us that we called him Tio Edman because he really was like an uncle to us. Edman took us to have fish at the biggest lake in Honduras called Lago Yojoa. The fish place we went to had a giant bucket of scaly tilapia for us choose which fish we wanted to eat. How they actually distinguished between all the tilapia in that bucket remains a mystery to me. Nevertheless, it was the best fish I had ever eaten. We then went to La Esperanza to stay the night at a hotel and explored the charming "city" in the morning.

The next day we got to Camasca, the place that quickly became our home away from home. The streets were cobbled, the houses were humble, and the people were curious. Because of the NGO's strong presence in Camasca, people knew we were North Americans but that didn't stop them from staring at us. I remember waving back at some of the kids who wouldn't break their gaze from us. Their excitement and giddiness that followed made me feel like I was a famous celebrity. After we settled in, we went on a tour of the town. The town itself takes about 45 minutes to cross, so the tour was short and sweet. We stayed in homestays with teachers from the public elementary school colloquially called "la Urbana". If the people of Camasca treated us like celebrities, then our homestay families treated us like queens and kings. They fed us three times a day with incredibly delicious food. Our intention before coming to Honduras was to conduct global health research (like Project HEAL does every year), but a few weeks in, I felt like we were doing much more. The NGO we worked with had asked us if we wanted to help teach English at "la Urbana" as a side-project. Key word here was "help". We were going to assist the teachers in teaching English by walking around and marking worksheets, or so we thought.

On our first day at la Urbana, there was a school-wide assembly that involved all the children singing to us while the teachers expressed their endless gratitude for our presence. La Urbana had never had any volunteers from a different country come to help so to them, we were a big deal. After the introductions, our team of five split up into each classroom. I got the oldest: Grade 7. Upon entering the classroom I

immediately noticed the poverty. The floors were dusty but wet, the books were soaking from the leaky tin roof. The room was relatively dark because of the lack of electricity, and the doors were so battered-down they scraped the floor loudly whenever the teachers opened them. Yet, the children didn't seem to notice any of this. They sat down with the sort of tangible energy only kids can bring and I quickly forgot about all the insufficiencies. The seventh grade teacher introduced himself to me and we got to joke a little bit. Then all of a sudden, he turned to the class and introduced me as "la profesora de Ingles". I blinked. Then he handed me the white board marker, sat down at his desk and looked up at me expectedly. I stared back, shocked.

Was I supposed to have something prepared?

My mind raced while the students watched me with big eyes, their pencils steady in their hands. The last time I taught something in front of a class was fourteen years ago. I was six, and my students were Barbie dolls.

Nevertheless, I have to admit I got pretty excited. I had an opportunity to share something with these incredible kids.

"Okay, how is everyone?" I yelled in English.

Blank stares.

"Perdon.. Que tal: How are you?" I tried to simplify.

Blank stares.

I needed to try something else, "Hello?"

Blank stares.

I didn't say this was easy.

Five weeks of teaching elementary kids was probably one of the greatest experiences. I was able to tap into my own childhood but also bring about dynamic learning experiences. Now you must be wondering by now, but what about the global health research? We taught the kids for an hour and half every morning from 7:30-9, and then went to conduct our research for the rest of the day. Since we spent a lot of time with the kids, many of the adults felt comfortable talking with us about our projects. My project was environmentally focused with the intention of learning more about what people do with their trash and how we can prevent accumulation and disease. I got a lot of eager responses from the community expressing their interest in the topic and during our educational "charlas" (talks) I taught mothers how to make a broom using plastic bottles. The two weeks before this we went house to house conducting interviews in Camasca and two other villages nearby and I was surprised with how willing people were to talk for thirty minutes about our independent projects. My survey only takes about ten minutes, but people were so open about their thoughts that even after the survey they kept talking to me. I felt truly welcomed in this humble community and I would go back in a heartbeat. Not only did I learn a lot about the environmental situation in rural Honduras, but I also learned a lot about the culture and about myself. From greeting everyone on the street to having three hour-long dinner conversations, the people of rural Honduras were one of the friendliest people I've met.

I got to know most people in Camasca and when we had to leave, I cried like a baby. To my defense, we all cried, adults and children alike. This summer has brought me the self-growth, gratitude and awareness that have given me a new appreciation for

everything I have. I am very grateful to you, DUCIGS, for having made this opportunity a reality and I simply cannot thank you enough.