

**Title: Casa De La Solidaridad: A Month of Absolute Belongingness**  
**By Elleni Hailu, Summer 2015**

**Introduction:** I had boarded the plane to El Salvador only two days after finishing finals and moving out from the dorms. Not only was I rushed and stressed about getting everything ready for the trip, I also did not have any time at all to be nervous for the trip. However, my time there was absolutely splendid and I loved every single minute of it. I was in awe of the unconditional love the Salvadorans profess and their strength in empowering their community despite the difficult adversities they faced. This Public Health summer program was not intended for students to intervene abruptly, rather, it is designed to introduce accompaniment and daily learning from the lifestyle of the Salvadorans and their spirituality. Cultural humility, competence, and most of all El Salvadoran culture and spirituality were highlighted during this program and it has impacted every single one of us in the program in such a short time. I was fortunate enough to be among one of the most loving, inspiring, and community-oriented individuals.



*My praxis site group and their extended family at our despedida*

**Housing:**

The living style during this program was the same as it is during the semester program. There are two houses that are specifically for study abroad students from the United States. The two houses for Casa students are called Casa Silvia and Casa Romero, and are right across the street from each other. They are located in the city of Antiguo Cuscatlan and are only within walking

distance of the University of Central America (UCA) where students take classes. Each house had about 12 students from Jesuit schools all over the US, including one community coordinator in each house. We also had some of the Salvadorian Scholarship students who were part of the Romero program (becari@s) in each house. Community living is very much encouraged, as there are weekly community nights with each individual house and optional spirituality nights with the whole program. These programs provided open space to share how we are experiencing El Salvador and to make sense of what we are learning and encountering everyday and were great opportunities to connect with house members and students of the program to establish a lifelong connection. Each house had a Salvadoran cook and staff member, who made authentic Salvadoran, and sometimes American food on the weekdays. We usually dined together with the cooks and Casa Romero as well, and learned about the country from the cooks themselves.



*The Casa Silvia crew*

### **Finances:**

The cost of living in El Salvador compared to the US is very cheap. Even though the cost of living for most of the Salvadorans is expensive because of their relatively low incomes, for most of us US students, it was cheap to purchase different things, especially food. During the weekends while we were expected to pay for our own meals, it was not at all a hassle, as there are many different restaurants, as well as Pupusarias near where we lived. Pupusas were even cheaper than every mean, ranged around 50 cents for one, and a filling burrito de pollo from Tato's down the street from the Casas for only \$4. Because the currency in El Salvador is officially the dollar, money exchange was not at all necessary. The only other reason we needed money besides food was for buying souvenirs, which are usually hand made and always mesmerizing, and to buy minutes for calling to the US. Minutes were available for purchase at

any pharmacy or a phone store and only cost 70 cents for 30 minutes. While I carried cash, many of my fellow students used their credit cards at major stores and took at cash for a \$3 processing fee at ATMs found in different stores.



*Chicken wings we got delivered for a very reasonable price*

### **Academics:**

The summer program offered PHSC 170 (Health Care in El Salvador), as well as two different Spanish classes, an Intermediate and Advanced Spanish for the Health Professions. With PHSC 170, we were able to learn about the basis of the health care system in El Salvador and compare it with the American Healthcare system. Not only were we educated by one of El Salvador's top surgeons, we were also able to visit different hospitals and clinics to gain a more constructed perspective on the issue. In addition to the healthcare system, we were able to learn about the health determinants in El Salvador in the context of the civil war and poverty.

In terms of the Spanish class, because the majority of the students were not fluent in Spanish, those classes provided the essential and core knowledge of the language. I hadn't taken a Spanish class since high school and was very nervous about my communication skills. However, the Salvadorans were very understanding and were very helpful in helping me learn the language. For me, most of the language-learning happened at my praxis site, with the Salvadorans themselves, while communicating about their day-to-day lives, as well as in the clinic Unidad de Salud and the health promoter where I spent half my time. Because the program was vastly involved in community engagement, classes were graded more on active participation. Even

though we had big projects and assignments, many of us found it interesting to do them because they were very connected with what we learned in the class room as well as what we experienced at our praxis sites everyday.



*Last day of Spanish Class at the UCA*

### **Student Life:**

As mentioned above, we took our classes at the University of Central America. To access internet, we usually went together to the near by café's and spent time there discussing our experiences. Through the weekly community and spirituality nights, we were able to establish a strong student life outside of the UCA.



*Two of the Becarias and I on our last day in El Salvador*

### **Social Life:**

In addition to the trips we took to the beach with the students of the program and such other places, we also had weekly Pupusa and soccer nights with the Becari@s (Romero program Scholarship Students). We were able to make strong connections with them and share about our life stories.

Same holds true to the social life at our praxis sites as well. We were able to actively engage and socially connect with the members of the communities at our praxis sites. Although we needed to be respectful of the dress code of not wearing anything provocative while we were at our sites, such as avoiding knee high shorts and mini skirts, and anything with spaghetti straps, everything went so pleasantly.

### **Engagement:**

Students went to their praxis groups each weekday, for a long duration on Mondays and Wednesdays and for a bit shorter days for the rest of the weekdays. My praxis site was El Comedor del Milagro de Jesus and Unidad de Salud, located in a rural town called Tepecoyo, in the village called La Javia. Throughout the month, I was able to help out in the soup kitchen in La Javia with cooking the meals for the students that come every day, visiting extended family members and neighbors of the praxis coordinator and the founder of the soup kitchen, accompanying the health promoter on the daily bases as she evaluates the weights of children in the area and checks up on the mothers and infants of the village. We also spent a great amount of time listening to the life experiences of community members at our praxis sites and learning from them.



*Some of the students that come to the soup-kitchen everyday*

### **Religion:**

The predominant religion in El Salvador is Catholicism. There is also a big population of Evangelist. Even though there were a number of us that were not Catholic, the majority of us went to mass at the biggest Cathedral, and where the beatified martyr Monseñor Romero rests. It was a great experience to see the faith and absolute dedication that the Salvadorans have for their

religion. I did not find offence at all in my time there, as most, if not all people I have met at my time there live according to Monseñor Romero's vision for the people and his exemplary humanitarian views. There is also a cathedral and an evangelist church in close proximity of the houses where we stays. As mentioned above however, religious views were not at all pushed on anyone and every religious event was optional.

### **Race/Ethnicity**

Even though students who were Caucasian stood out from our group in El Salvador, it was obvious that a couple of us who were black and students with Asian ethnic background were even more distinguished. It was obvious to see that most of the Salvadorans have not had interactions with people of my ethnic background, Asian individuals. However, they were equally welcoming and loving. They were intrigued by my skin color and my hairstyle and asked all sorts of questions about the subject matter but were not at all judgmental to the point where I, was offended.

### **Gender & Sexuality:**

Even though the women we mostly interacted with were strong and resourceful, there is a very deep culture of machismo. Men are usually held high on the social ladder. It is very visible in the day-to-day lives, as the women are responsible for taking care of the children, including taking the children to the hospital, and overall house hold maintenance. It is also visible, as there are many catcalls directed at women while walking through the cities. I was also able to learn from the community at my praxis group that women are financially unstable as they are fully responsible in the house and a number of the working-men are financially irresponsible.

### **Socio-economic**

Through my time in El Salvador I was reminded of acknowledging my privileges while living in the US. We were introduced to simple living, as the houses we lived in did not have hot water, as well as Wi-Fi and laundry machines. Even though I lived most of my life in a similar manner in Ethiopia, I was able to be immersed in that environment again and learned to appreciate the lifestyle I have in the US.

### **Conclusion**

All in all, what I experienced in El Salvador cannot be finalized on paper and I would be oversimplifying if I say that it was an absolute bliss. What I learned from the Salvadorans has impacted my life forever and changed the way I view the world. I highly encourage SCU students to take advantage of this amazing opportunity, get out of their comfort zones and to see what absolute belongingness in a foreign country feels like.



*A shop in a rural town (Tepecoyo)*

### **Ability and learning considerations**

Every opportunity in El Salvador is an opportunity to learn. The only important tool necessary is cultural humility and respect. My suggestion for students who are going on this program is to be open to any experiences, not to try to analyze and attempt to fix, but solely to listen and be present. As every praxis site varies and has many different lessons to offer, it is important to pay attention to the time spent there. In the United States, we tend to be achievers and goal-oriented and have a certain standard of living that society sets as “good” or “bad.” However, in this program, it is absolutely necessary to stray from such tendencies and take advantage of every opportunity to learn from the Salvadorans and other students in the program, as well as many different guest speakers, faculty and staff, by being totally present and accompanying one another.

### **Leisure: (Review and Update)**

During our time in El Salvador, we made a couple trips to two different beautiful beaches, breathtaking fountains, attended a fourth of July barbeque, took surfing and dancing classes, spent a weekend of retreat in a neighboring state, had a jewelry workshop, as well as spent a day at a ranch where we spent playing games and riding horses. Even though we had a short time to do all that El Salvador has to offer, the program directors and the casa staff were able to provide us with the resources to enjoy ourselves. As mentioned above, we also had soccer tournaments with the students from Romero Program, one weekday of every week.



*At the waterfalls in Juayúa*

**Shopping:**

The shops in El Salvador range from small shops to big malls. The shops in the cities are very American-like and carry almost every thing that the US has, from personal items to food and cloth. If possible, it is good to buy personal items at home for convenience and cost reasons. Souvenirs can be bought from street sides or from different field trip sites. They are mainly hand crafted and reflect the rich culture of El Salvador.