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Gracias a Dios Para la Experiencia

This past summer of 2015, I had the privilege of studying abroad in El Salvador through the Casa de la Solidaridad program. Besides the magnificence of this entire experience as a whole, one specific aspect of the program that really had the biggest impact on me involved my stay at my praxis site. Each group of about 4-6 people was assigned a praxis site that we visited for 4-5 hours a day. My praxis site included El Pueblo de Dios en Camino in San Ramon; a Christian based community geared towards uniting the people of San Ramon, and ANADES, an organization that provides for the health, education, and community of the people. The last day of our praxis site, my praxis site coordinators gathered a couple families, that we were fortunate enough to get to know, to their campo. We all exchanged some words of thanks and goodbye followed by numerous songs including Spanish melodies and even "Imagine" by John Lennon. We were all in tears as we faced the reality that we were probably never going to see some of these wonderful people but also at the beauty, strength, and faith that we witnessed in the community. Hector, one of my praxis site coordinators said something that I will never forget. He said, "You all were willing to live and learn about the history of El Salvador and I have faith that the mutual love we have experienced here will be transferred to your communities at school and at home." Anita, the owner of the campo, then came out with gifts for each of us. One part of it was an egg that had a volcano drawn on it and inside the egg are little figures of Christ and Mary. This signified that the people in San Ramon are rich in their faith and they believe God is at the core of the community. Their words and the incredible meaning behind their gifts touched me.

Housing

The Casa de la Solidaridad program has two houses that the students stay in for the fall and spring semesters and the summer as well: Casa Silvia and Casa Romero. Each house holds about 12 people. Casa Romero includes several bedrooms encircling a garden and there is also a living room and a small library. Casa Silvia is enclosed and has a small garden in the back. The advantage of having this housing arrangement is that we are able to converse with the other students in the Casa program and share experiences or anything new that we learned in our praxis site. We also live with Salvadoran students our age studying at the local Universities. However one of the drawbacks to having this arrangement is that we have no reason to keep speaking the Spanish.

Finances:

There is no need for a currency exchange in El Salvador because the US dollar is their main currency as well. However, the US dollar has a lot more value in El Salvador than it does in the states. Clothing for the most part is very cheap, I was able to get about five outfits under \$8. When it comes to handmade items such as bracelets, Salvadoran clothing and other traditional items, they are slightly pricier than regular clothing. I was

able to get earrings for \$3 each but considering the amount of time spent making the item, you feel bad just paying something as small as \$3. Overall, souvenirs or something that signifies Salvadoran work is slightly pricier but overall, things such as food, clothes, gas, are all significantly cheaper than prices in the US. In terms of access to atm, there were several at the grocery store not too far from our houses.

Academics:

The best way to succeed in the program is to fully engage and ask questions at the praxis site. The class is titled Public Health and Health Care in El Salvador so a majority of the time is spent connecting our readings with some of the experiences we had in the praxis communities. It's also more interesting to hear about the history and health of the community if a person has/is living through it, it brings the situation to life, which is what many people in the program feel had the biggest impact on their learning experience. Even the professors emphasized the fact that they would rather have the students participate and answer the questions they ask rather than having several tests. In terms of requirements from the University, that doesn't really apply for the summer session because we are not really students there, we just have our classes in that location.

Student Life:

When we were not in class or at our praxis site, the majority of our time was spent in the Casa's or surrounding café's, ice cream shops, and numerous restaurants with wifi. Many of us took our laptops there to work on our essays, call family members, check emails, etc. Every Thursday, we have the option to play soccer with the Beccario's as well as study time in the peace house (located in the same campo as Kevin and Trena's house) every Wednesday after our cleaning party. We don't have a designated library area but there are café's in the area and time after dinner to work on homework silently or read.

Social Life:

For me, Casa really helped me get closer to the faculty and staff from Santa Clara University, especially those in the department of my major. It was a great chance for me to talk to them in a very informal setting including the beach visits and several shared dinners. I took this chance to share my experiences with them and start conversation. I also loved being able to live with Salvadoran students in the Casa's. They are the most approachable people I have ever met. I distinctly remember how I first started talking to Reyna who lived in the same Casa I did. I was walking over to do laundry and she said hello as I walked past her room and that ended up being an hour conversation that lasted until midnight. Being that the summer program is very compacted given its short nature, there aren't many activities outside our scheduled ones that we can get involved in but I would suggest making the most out of dinner conversations and weekend excursions.

Religion:

The predominant religion in the region is Catholicism and there is a very strong emphasis placed on the importance of Señor Romero. Señor Romero believed in the preferential option for the poor and constantly advocated for those that are marginalized in society. Therefore he is a highly revered and respected Saint in essentially all of El

Salvador. When I went to the historic church in downtown San Salvador, I absolutely loved the ceremony. It seemed very similar to an American mass where there were verses read followed by some hymns. I personally am Christian, not Catholic, however, I still feel it was great to learn about and experience the importance of Señor Romero in the lives of many Salvadorans.

My praxis site included a faith based community. It was very uplifting, inspiring, and moving to see how strong of a role faith played in the lives of many of the people I was able to meet. Even if one is not a religious person, it's a great learning experience to where their hope and love lies.

Race/Ethnicity:

As an Eritrean-American, I don't think I have ever witnessed so much love and genuine interest in people of my skin color. My praxis site coordinators often asked about the terrible race situation in the United States with concern as well as the numerous cultures within my parents' hometown of Eritrea in East Africa. The only marginalization that I was aware of involves the indigenous Nawat people as told by my praxis site coordinator.

Gender & Sexuality:

The machismo culture in El Salvador is very strong. Many of the men cat call girls and women as they pass by in cars and I was a victim to this. This machismo culture was also evident in my homestay during our weekend stay in Chaletenango in terms of the power dynamic explicit among men and women.

Socio-Economic:

Oftentimes when I went to the café for wifi, I took my Apple MacBook Air computer and my Apple iPhone 5. It was definitely throughout my visits to the café that my socio-economic status, relative to the area that I was in, was highlighted to a great degree. In the community that we lived, higher class/socio-economic status was evident through the types of clothing, shoes, and cars that the Salvadorans drove. This is also evident in the United States.

Ability and Learning Considerations:

I would say, in order to maximize your learning experience in El Salvador, always ask questions. Most of my learning was done outside of the classroom and don't be worried about your Spanish speaking capabilities. Many of the Salvadoran people that we talked to were always so willing to work with the students to understand what they were saying if the student could not say much.

Leisure:

As I mentioned earlier, there isn't much leisure time to explore the city because the summer program is very compacted with a an eventful schedule however our weekend excursions were very fun and educational. The first weekend we went to Costa del Sol, a resort on the beach and the second weekend we went to Carasce in Chaletenango, a historical place known for the Massacre in Sumpul. The third week we had the option to hike a volcano, swim in a waterfall, or take surfing lessons.

Shopping:

The closest shopping mall with stores that we would see at a traditional US mall is about 10-15 minutes away from the Casas. There are two taxi drivers who work for the Casa program that we can call to go to places like that. There is also a thrift store and many mom and pop stores along La Antigua all of which are walking distance from the Casas.