

Aaron Colvin

1/10/06

Final Report

Long Way Home

When I first arrived in San Jaun Comalapa, Guatemala I was in the back of a pick up truck with my entire luggage and four other interns in the same situation. Of course this was after a twelve day trip across Mexico and western Guatemala. On the way down we spent lots of time talking about the expectations of volunteers as well as volunteer expectations. We arrived on site in a small village named Chimiya which is made up of 125 indigenous Guatemalans (about a 20 minute walk from the center of Comalapa). Upon arrival a couple local musicians had set up their instruments and welcomed us to our new home. We were given a tour from the director who is from Texas but I learned not to hold that against him. I met the director in Ashland just before my studies in New Zealand where he offered me the opportunity to come and be involved in a development project. I didn't really know what to think. Well, this project is just that, a development project. We are building a community park emphasizing ecology, sustainable technology, and community.

Developmental work in Central America is not easy. There are a lot of variables to consider when working in a remote part of Guatemala. One that stood out everyday, everywhere I went, was the language difference. Before coming to Guatemala I had never taken the time to try to learn Spanish. I simply did not know any Spanish at all. In the first few days I was completely lost in any situation involving Spanish which created quite the problem when communication was needed. During the first week I started taking Spanish classes with a local woman three days a week for roughly three hours a day. With her help and the help of my peers I started to pick up more and soon

I could get my point across and have some understanding of the language when spoken. In the midst of the classes, I was working with community leaders and local handyman named Don Julian. Julian has lived in Chimiya all his life and has helped develop my relationship within the community. He is on the project site six days a week eight hours a day. Over the last two months we have built a storage room, developed a tree nursery, and worked around the soccer field. Julian is always good for a conversation after work and is a permanent fixture in my life here on the project site. Within two months my Spanish had undergone a complete makeover and I could understand speakers and communicate my opinion in many different ways.

Professionally my long term goals are to work with kids. Being involved in this project at such a grassroots level has really given me the perspective I need to try and meet this goal. First of all I understand what an undertaking it is to be involved with kids on an international level. This type of work requires complete dedication and a real passion. Personally this project has been a real eye opener. For the most part my long term goals have been more of a fantasy. I really didn't know what the whole thing involved. Now that I have been here and lived in and with poverty I have a reason to try harder than ever.

Even though Spanish was a huge obstacle, the biggest challenge of all has been earning the respect of my fellow villagers and the staff of our host country agency. The language barrier forced me to speak with my actions rather than words. In order to gain the respect of the locals I concentrated on my work ethic. The U.S. has a bad reputation and it followed me down here. After two months of working with locals I had earned their respect by showing them that our lives in many ways are not that different.

A big part of my growth in Guatemala was the relationship that I developed with the founder and director of Long Way Home. Matt Panietz has showed me the dedication it takes to drop everything in your life and devote the rest of it to helping the less fortunate. From the moment I started this adventure south I have looked up to him for advise, support, and as an example. One example of his dedication to the project and the people involved is his relationship with the community. There has not been a time when I have been with Mateo in town and not had kids hugging him or old men wanting to shake his hand. He has become one of the few role models for the people of this community and the project and park reflects that.

Coming to a country like Guatemala you get a ton of advice. Most of that advice revolves around all of the danger and corruption one can expect to encounter. On the contrary, people in my village and pretty much all throughout Guatemala couldn't be any friendlier. When my neighbours found out that I would be spending Christmas alone I was given another example of that kindness. I can hardly count the tamales and in all I received three Christmas dinners. I truly felt like I was welcomed by the families to have so generously invited me to share this holiday with them.

When walking into a situation like this it is hard to know what to expect. I had heard so many things and pretty much disregarded all of it for the sake of keeping an open mind. Matt did his best to prepare us for the adventure, but how can anybody explain all that I have seen. More than anything I wish Matt would have told me to bring more Heinz Katsup and white chocolate.

The daily routine in the life of a LWH intern begins with breakfast at 8am in the main staff quarters. This is also where we discuss the possibilities for the day. Most days are dedicated to developing the land and providing a place for the youth to participate in community related activities.. After a noon lunch we usually then split up

to try and keep up with life in a village that provides no running water or dependable electricity. We have to make our purchases in the town market, maintain the grounds, and run all of our errands. Around sundown we have dinner and prepare for Spanish classes. If we still have the energy after Spanish class we might spend a couple of hours reading, playing cards, or just thinking about all that we need to do in the future. So far we have started and maintained a 6,000+ tree nursery. We have built a compost latrine, a solar shower, and a fence to separate our living quarters from the park. We have spent the last few days trying to concentrate on the soccer field and the botanical garden. We also work with a group of 15 yr. old kids and are trying to start a soccer league with them. Our next projects are building a community kitchen and making trails and identifying the vegetation in the protected forest.

The main thing that I suggest for future interns is to bring an open mind. Since we are doing development work in uncharted territory it is also good to bring extra patience. The people in this country are on a completely different time frame and that can be frustrating to get used to. You can expect a diet of fruits and vegetables which is very healthy. Expect lots of physical exertion. You can expect walking to be your main source of transportation. Anything outside of town is done on a chicken bus. Which I like! You should expect to spend 15 cents on a carrot and two dollars for transport to the capital. You can expect dorm style living and a beautiful view each morning. Depending on when you are here you can either depend on lots of sun or lots of rain. More than anything you can expect an experience that will change your life.