Amber Puffenbarger

“Medical Service Learning in Guatemala”

Summer 2015

Every day I would walk into Marina Guriola I felt a newfound sense of belonging. Nineteen sets of little eyes and big smiles greeted me every morning. Countless hugs and kisses followed, engulfing me into a sea of happiness. Although I couldn’t speak their language perfectly, never once did I feel hindered from giving them every ounce of my heart.

My time in Guatemala was priceless and something that I will never be able to experience in the same way. I traveled with Campbell on a medical mission study abroad. While in country, I worked in a pediatric disability clinic, giving a home to nineteen beautiful children who have nowhere else to go. Marina Guriola is operational only because of the Catholic Church and the kindhearted nuns who work tirelessly to care for children who have a wide array of disabilities. Along with two other volunteers, I cared for the children every morning and into the afternoon, helping with whatever we could. Whether it was feeding, teaching, playing, or physical therapy, there was never a dull moment. Although it was a tiring job, nothing could have been more perfect for me.

Working wasn’t the only aspect of the trip though and we were given lots of time to experience the rest of Guatemala. We shopped in the street markets, hiked a volcano, zip lined across Lake Atitlan, and toured many beautiful buildings such as the palace and a cathedral. Adventure was most certainly packed into our three week trip! Overcoming fear was one of my biggest accomplishments!

There were other moments though, ones that we all remember well, where we sat together reflecting on the person we were becoming. Study abroad doesn’t just change you temporarily; instead it rewrites the way you think and act and shows you just how lucky we are to have the things we do. Guatemala is a country that has been torn apart repeatedly for many years now. Their political system is in shambles and yet they hold onto their Mayan beliefs passed on from earlier generations. It was so lovely to immerse myself into their culture and see the world from an entirely new perspective. Never before had I known of a more beautiful world.

Oliver Wendell Holmes says, “A mind that is stretched by a new experience can never go back to its old dimensions.” My mind will never be the same as before my trip, simply because I’ve seen the world from someone else’s shoes. There’s no way to come home the same person after touching the hands of a girl who never wants to let go, helping a child walk for the first time, and having the courage to say a temporary goodbye. Leaving Marina Guriola was so much more of a heartache than leaving home could ever be.

My story will remain in my heart for the rest of my life, yet had I not gone, there would be an emptiness resting there forever. As I further my journeys, I will inch closer to the person that I’ve been called to be and build the heart within me out of stronger memories. Study abroad was the first time I’ve realized that there is a world of opportunity, beckoning me forward to experience the unknown and live courageously. Guatemala was my wake up call.

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