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JJCF Third Report

I am grateful for the JJCF grant for multiple reasons. Most obviously, the grant allowed me the financial ability to have this experience at all and to focus my attention on my work rather than earning money. However, almost as importantly, the grant forced me to reflect on my time as the Lead Youth English Teacher in Brasilito. As I tried to determine where to start with this report, I read over my last two updates. My responsibilities largely remained the same throughout my time in Brasilito. However, both extremely positive and negative events have occurred after October, amplifying the depth of my experience. I learned to fiercely value the good. With the bad, the best I could do was learn from it and grow. I will begin with the challenges, or rather “opportunities for growth,” so as to end on a positive note—the way I ultimately view my experience in Brasilito.

Opportunities for Growth

Shortly after my last report we entered into the heart of the rainy season in Guanacaste. With the rainy season comes a bit of relief from the extreme heat and dust that abound in the dry months, and, unfortunately, a host of mosquito-borne illnesses. Dengue is a constant threat there and has been for years. This past year, in addition, the Chikungunya virus swept the area. Chikungunya symptoms include a full-body rash, a high fever for several days, headache, and bone and joint aches—which typically last between a few months to over a year. I was not one of the lucky few who avoided the virus in Brasilito, and in fact, got hit quite hard in November. Though I was in bed for a full week, I was fortunate. I did not have to leave my job due to debilitation that resulted from the pain, like some. My wonderful friends shared their beds and couch the whole week, and my supervisor checked on me daily and eventually forced me to go to the doctor, though I resisted because there is no treatment besides pain medication. I still hold the nickname “Chikungunya” around town because the few people who saw me in my brief debut to the town on my way to the doctor were so shocked by the severity of my rash. The pain was strong enough to be debilitating for the following two months, but now has subsided to just minor aches in my feet.

This situation was a lesson in public health. Most of the town members who got sick did not go to the doctor. Some, like me, saw the futility in going, as there is no treatment. Some did not go because they are Nicaraguan and not legal residents, and therefore are not covered by the Costa Rican universal healthcare system. Some Costa Ricans are not covered by the universal health system, so they did not go. No matter the reason, their cases went unreported, meaning the government was unaware of the gravity of the outbreak in the region, and the ministry of health did not step in until almost the entire town had already been infected. More education on prevention, rights, and the importance of getting tested for reporting purposes, along with support from the

government in the form of fumigation and resources to avoid mosquito bites could have decreased the severity of the outbreak dramatically.

Now, the Zika virus has been reported in Costa Rica, and the potential consequences for the region are grave if proper prevention efforts are not in place. The damage the Zika virus causes to infants born to mothers infected during pregnancy could affect the region for generations to come health-wise, socially, and economically.

In addition to Chikungunya, my last several months were marked by a few instances of extreme domestic violence. One of my Kindergarten students was witness to one of those instances and came to class the following day traumatized. I tried to step into the situation without putting myself in danger, but that situation and the others that have arisen have made me realize how difficult it is to take legal action quickly—or at all there. Even when legal measures are taken, they are not always effective, which resulted in tragedy. Again, education on rights and protocol in reaction to these situations is critical and absolutely missing there at this time. Above all, the culture of machismo gives rise to these situations, which is the most difficult but most important piece of the puzzle to alter. I did my small part by encouraging equality, self-esteem, and respect for others in my classes, but a cultural shift of this magnitude will take many more years than I could be in Brasilito.

Each of these negative events were extremely challenging for the community and myself, but I hope to carry what I learned from them with me in my future academically, professionally, and personally.

The Positive

I continued to devote my time to teaching, extra-curricular activities, and enjoying the friendships I developed there both with community members and co-workers. My relationships with the kids grew profoundly. I value each of them and am overwhelmingly proud of their successes. One of the children I am most proud of is a Kindergarten student who began coming to class shortly after I began as the lead teacher. This child is the second youngest in a family of nine—all of whom live in the same, tiny house. Like many pre-Kindergarten students, he had never been exposed to a structured environment, and he did not take well to the new setting. He could not sit in a chair for more than five seconds, he did not speak or make eye contact with anyone in the class, and he did not participate in a single activity, but rather ran circles around the room causing chaos. After a couple months of attempts at discipline, I realized that what this child needed more than anything was someone who valued him, loved him, and listened to his attempts at speech. I began to give him excessive positive feedback for any small success, welcome him warmly with a hug when we picked him up from his house and any time I saw him, and dedicate my full attention to him whenever he attempted to say anything. After months of working with him, he would run to hug me when he saw me, continued to grow in his speech, interacted positively with others in the class, and worked hard to complete every activity (in his chair!) so that he could raise his “clip,” one of my behavior management techniques. He was an extreme case, but so many of my students grew immensely in my time there, and I feel truly overwhelming affection for each of them.

I grew to be much more comfortable in my role as a teacher. Over the winter vacation, one of my close friends who is a third grade, trained teacher, gave me a huge

amount of advice, which made classroom management a whole different ball game and improved my classes by leaps and bounds. I also read more on the process of learning and language acquisition and was able to go to a training session on sensory development. In addition, some generous family members donated materials and games to my student, both of which altered my teaching techniques, improved the classroom, and added variety to our activities. Above all, I learned that I am capable of successfully adapting to any situation, which dramatically increased my comfort level in every aspect of my work and life there. Every piece of my day revolved around being adaptable. We had to change the class schedule about five times after February because of changes in the public school schedule, so I ended up teaching a few more hours a week, both in the morning and afternoons. I never knew if four kids will show up to my class or fourteen, but I knew I could think on my feet to alter the lesson plan to accommodate whatever situation.

Conclusion

My time in Brasilito as the Lead Youth English Teacher was full of ups and downs. I could not have expected a more intense year, professionally or personally. Both my confidence and humility grew. I experienced an overwhelming amount of love and sincerely hope that I returned that love to every one of my students. I have now been home for almost a month, and I miss them more than they can imagine. I hope to be able to remain a part of their lives. I will begin a master's to PhD program in Maternal and Child Health at UNC, Chapel Hill in the fall, and I expect that my experiences in Brasilito will enhance my studies and following work.