

The last few months that I have spent in Brasilito, Costa Rica have definitely been life changing. In such a short time I not only learned about a completely different way of life and community, but I also grew and changed as a person. I was able to experience first hand a way of life completely different from anything I knew before. There were many ups and downs but overall I am certain that I am coming away a better person with a much wider perspective.

This experience has also allowed me to learn a lot about non-profit organizations and how difficult it is to do anything when you are forced to rely exclusively on funding from donors. Having a set amount of money and resources definitely limits the kind of activities that you are able to accomplish. Casa Brasilito especially, relies on support from three different non-profit organizations and does not have any of its own funding. There is therefore, a very stark difference between the classroom and office in Brasilito and the one in Potrero where Abriendo Mentas has its central location. Even though I technically worked for Abriendo Mentas, I could not help feeling like I was a part of a completely different organization. The level of poverty in Brasilito is much higher than in Potrero, and this is evident when one looks at the overall living conditions.

Initially, I was not doing the kind of work that I expected. My position was mainly that of an office assistant. I had to spend a lot of time in the little office in Brasilito and was not really exposed to the community. However, after speaking to the Director and getting to know the on-site psychologist, I was able to take on a more hands-on role. The psychologist introduced me to a lot of women in the community and I was able to help with the Food Bank program and to attend a few

of their meetings. I learned that the Brasilito community is very small and everyone knows everyone else. There is a lot of gossip and the women often get into serious disagreements or arguments with one another, which makes it difficult to come to a mutual agreement. It was surprising to me the number of complaints we received about the type and amount of food we were providing each month, even though the food was free and the women only had to perform small jobs in exchange. It makes me strongly believe that it is important to teach skills and change mind sets rather than just provide donations. It seems that people can become accustomed to donations and have no real motivation to change things for themselves.

I did however, also see a lot of women who were enthusiastic and eager to learn and grow. For example, there is a woman's shop where the women are able to sell clothes and other items to make a small profit. Part of the profit goes to Casa Brasilito and the other part to the women directly. In this way the women are able to run a small business and to raise extra money for themselves and their families. There are also women who attend English classes with Abriendo Mentes. One of my neighbors even takes English classes through a program in another town and I often helped her with homework.

I continue to believe that education is the greatest asset to any community. Giving individuals the information necessary to take care of themselves will ensure that the information continues to get passed down. I met children here who did not know how to read or write and it turned out that their parents did not either, which only continued the cycle because there was no emphasis placed on education. I think that this is something that can be stressed in all countries, even in the U.S. The only

way for families to escape the cycle of poverty is for them to learn job skills that will help them to secure employment and to in turn support themselves and their families.