

## **Overview**

My experience in Guanacaste, Costa Rica has up to this point, been a very eye opening one. I found myself in the midst of extreme poverty, living in a community with limited education and job accessibility. However, a few feet away there are five star hotels and resorts, catering to the ever-growing tourist industry in Guanacaste. This difference in economic levels and opportunity really opened my eyes to the effect that tourism can have on a community.

The cost of living in Guanacaste is comparable to U.S prices, maybe in some sense even trumping the cost of goods back home. In order to eat cheaply, one must be limited to a diet mainly of plain rice and beans and some fruit. I was actually surprised at the lack of fresh fruit and vegetables and learned that they really are not accessible for most people within the community. I find it unsettling to think that most people cannot afford essentials in their own hometown. There is a severe shortage of jobs in Brasilito, which transformed from mostly a fishing and farming village, to one focused mainly on the tourism sector. A lot of the locals here only have an elementary education and do not speak English well enough to be employed in hotels and restaurants. This leaves them constantly unemployed and unsure of their next source of income. There is also a very “machismo” culture within Brasilito, which leaves women reliant on men for support and income. A large proportion of women are stuck in abusive relationships with no ways of supporting themselves.

The children in Brasilito, are also often subjected to abuse, including sexual abuse. There is a school in the town, which is held in the large “Salon Comunal” or common building and makeshift dividers separate the classes, with children of all

ages housed in the same small facility. The town school also only caters to elementary aged children and those older than that must attend middle and high school about an hour or more away from the town.

### **Casa Brasilito**

The organization Abriendo Mentes, which I chose to volunteer with, focuses on empowering and educating the community. My work specifically, is based in Brasilito, and I assist the Director as a Community Development intern with Casa Brasilito. Casa Brasilito was formed by three organizations, Abriendo Mentes, CEPIA and La Paz School. The mission of Casa Brasilito is to empower the community of Brasilito. This is mainly done through youth and adult English classes, providing food donations with the support of the local Food Bank, and having a psychologist available to work with the women and children.

### **My Role**

As the Community Development intern, my job has so far been to assist with event planning, community involvement and overall administrative and organizational tasks. A big event that we held earlier in the month was a beach and town clean-up. I publicized the event on facebook and hung up flyers around town. I also talked to community members and they helped to gather support. We then hosted the clean up at 7 am one Saturday, and were able to collect roughly twenty bags of trash. A lot of children and some adults showed up and spent several hours picking up trash all over town. It was a very humbling experience and it felt great to

see so many people invested in their town. We also hosted a girl's soccer game to celebrate the Women's World Cup, with the help of Lacrosse the Nations, a partner organization of Abriendo Mentes. I publicized the even around town and we held several practices before the game. The girls in Brasilito were very passionate about soccer and were excited to practice and participate. On the day of the game, the other volunteers brought a group of girl's from the town of Potrero, and they had a mini tournament. The game started out well and they seemed to be having fun, until the end. The Brasilito girls lost and became very upset and angry, even refusing to shake hands with the winning team. For me, this experience just demonstrated the need for organized teams and events for the kids. I hope to start up a more stable team to help the girls learn teamwork and good sportsmanship, as well as respect and dedication.

Another of my tasks so far has been maintaining the Casa Brasilito facebook page, because it is seen by a lot of members of the community. I frequently post event information and photos of prior events to keep everyone aware of what is happening. I have also been helping with the Food Bank. Casa Brasilito, with the help of the on-site psychologist, has identified about 12 families living in extreme poverty in Brasilito. There are many factors that can lead to an extreme poverty classification, but a few include, the state of the homes, and the well-being of the children. The program is targeted towards women, and the goal is to help the women feel more confidence in their own abilities. In exchange for a monthly donation of food from the Food Bank, the women perform tasks such as cleaning or volunteering and attend sessions with the psychologist. I have gone to volunteer at

the Food Bank and sort food with some of the women. I have also sorted the donations that we have received to make sure that each family receives the right amount of food, based on the number of family members, which includes the women and children.

I also help out with the sports program almost weekly with Lacrosse the Nations. For about an hour, twice a week, the kids are able to play various sports related games and to stay active. A lot of children from Brasilito come to sports and enjoy participating. I feel that this is a great way for them to have constructive activities while also learning how to play with others. Sometimes I also assist the other volunteers in Brasilito, with art and computer classes.

Overall, I have been staying busy and feel like there is a lot that needs to be accomplished in Brasilito. I believe that Casa Brasilito is still a relatively new organization and could definitely use more community connections and support in order to grow. I also feel that my role is important in helping to keep everything organized and in organizing events and activities, with community support, in order to help Brasilito flourish.