

In the hospital, and in any setting, you can learn a lot about people by talking to them. So that is exactly what I did for the first couple of days in León. I walked around, asked for directions and listened to the language. I went into the market with one of the Rotoract members and looked around. Language is really important because I am a native Spanish speaker, but the dialect is different depending on the region. Early on I noticed that the language used a lot of forms of endearment. When addressing someone, as “you”, I was used to using the word “tu” or “usted” and the Nicaraguans use the word “vos.” Some of the pronunciation was different from what I was used to, but not to where it was a language barrier. I realized that my Spanish proficiency was extremely useful and it helped enrich my experience. I could easily communicate with the people in the community and the patients.

As service learning volunteer it was useful to also be partnered with a community service organization in the community in which I was serving. The Metropolitan Rotoract Club of León is a 15-member organization, which serves the community through partnership. The members are mainly medical, pharmacy, engineering and business students. I attended their meetings, socials and participated in some of their community service events. I went with them and members of the Rotary Club to visit surrounding communities in which water wells were donated. The people from surrounding rural communities are also the patients that come into HEODRA. I got to see how they lived. I also took part in planting around “El Puente de Guadalupe,” which is a bridge of one of the major Catholic churches in León. We also painted over some of the graffiti that was on the bridge. The major project that the Rotoract Club and I partnered on was the renovation of the play area in the Pediatrics Department. This was possible through help from the JJC Foundation grant. The process of the project was started before I left to León. I asked the President of the Rotoract Club to send me a list of possible materials needed, and I would choose what I could help out with. I presented my project to the JJC Foundation, which was quick in their response that they were happy to help out in the project. Without the JJC Foundation grant, the project would have been more difficult to accomplish. In order to help out the local economy, the material was purchased in Nicaragua. The Rotoract Club also works in conjunction with the Rotary Club of León, which Dr. Alemán is the President of.

The renovation process went about differently than I had imagined, but it was adequate. The hospital has a schoolroom for pediatric patients where they can receive classes and play during their hospital stay. This room did not have a fan and always became very hot, so I made sure one of the fans that I had purchased was designated for the schoolroom. The hospital schoolroom Professor and a Pediatric Psychiatrist also helped me in deciding on what educational supplies and toys would be suitable to purchase. The Rotoract Club and I celebrated the holiday “Día del Niño” which means children’s day. This is a special day that children should enjoy. We brought snacks, juice, party favors, a piñata and clowns. Even some of the patients from the Orthopedics department came out and participated. The event really brought life to the hospital. On this day we also announced the renovations that would be done in the

playroom. The mothers clapped and we received very positive feedback about making changes to the hospital. The Rotoract Club helped me purchase, transport, and deliver the educational materials to the hospital. This community is very happy and likes to celebrate events, so when we brought the toys we made it a celebratory event in Pediatrics. The parents and children gathered in the schoolroom and we explained to them that the toys were a donation in order to better the hospital stay for the kids. In total the delivery consisted of: 2 sets of foam letters that formed like a carpet, 2 boxes of Legos, 2 bags of Legos, 12 containers of play dough, 12 boxes of crayons, 4 boxes of Dominos, 4 big wooden puzzles, 6 small wooden puzzles, 10 coloring books, 4 smaller Lego cases, 5 memory games, and 5 Spanish story books. One of the patients who had the biggest impact on me was one of the first patients I interacted with in Pediatrics, who came back to the hospital to visit me after she was all better. It was perfect timing because it was the day that the Rotoract members and I delivered the toys to the schoolroom. She was very pleased to see that now there would be more than three puzzles. She had a long hospital stay, and it would help distract her to come to the schoolroom. She shared her room with another patient who was very unhappy and would not let her rest sometimes and she always looked forward to spending time with the hospital Professor and me.

The play area had three broken fans and the floor was not in good conditions for the children to play. Originally the idea was to just paint over the floor. But as I spoke with Dr. Alemán and other personnel from Pediatrics, it seemed like a better idea to install tile floor. This would be a long-term solution, rather than short terms cover up. Dr. Alemán said that he would add it on to part of the medical student's tasks to take the children into the renovated playroom. It was going to be put to good use. With use there comes wear and tear, and tile would last longer than paint. Also, the entrance to the play area was shared with a washroom. There were mops and buckets that would take away from the view and weren't very clean. After talking to Dr. Alemán, the decision was made to change the entrance of the playroom to another wall. The budget was not enough for all of the changes in the renovations. In the short time they had to fundraise, the Rotary and Rotoract Club came up with monetary contributions. We got approval for the renovations and then the next step was finding someone who could do the work at an affordable price. I believe that this way turned out to be better than I had imagined because it was not just my project for the hospital, but it was done by collaboration with members of the community. I think that makes them feel as if the project belongs to them at a more personal level. I was very grateful to get so much cooperation from the Rotary and Rotoract Club and also feedback from the hospital staff. With the money we had about three fourths of the floor in the playroom was going to get tile installed.

The renovations started the last week that I was in Nicaragua. All of the staff was happy that it was being done. They saw that Dr. Alemán and I worked at it very hard, and spoke to many people to try and get the project going. On my last day at the hospital I got to see the beginning of the change of the entrance to the washroom. This brought me so much satisfaction,

not because I participated in the change, but because of the people who were going to benefit from it. The entrance would be more sanitary and also aesthetically pleasing. It is really important to make things as comfortable as possible for the patients because many of them come from very far to get medical attention. There are medical centers and clinics in the rural outskirts of León, but they are not equipped for providing extensive medical attention. It felt great to be able to have gained the trust of the hospital staff in which they allowed me to partake in the renovations occurring in the hospital.

León is a clean city with colonial architecture. The people are used to tourists and are really helpful with directions. The people are easy going and it is typical to see people on their porch enjoying each other's company in the afternoons. During my eight-week stay I saw many tourists, especially by the Cathedral, La Catedral de la Asuncion. I stayed about a block and a half from this beautiful cathedral. There are many churches in León, each with their own design, some with high wooden ceilings. My rule was to never go into a church during mass and take pictures. I saw it happen many times that tourists would come in during a mass and start clicking away. The people of the community were used to this, but I did not want to exclude myself as an outsider. I would only take pictures when mass was not in session. I wanted to respect their mass because religion is very important to the community. Once the mother of a patient was telling me about how she grew up in one religion and then converted into another. She believed that certain toys were bad and that bad things happened because people had been mischievous. I listened to her but never gave my opinion. I only brought her daughter toys that her mother approved of. This was not a problem at all and I learned to be prudent and tolerant to her religion. I witnessed patients not wanting to get treatment due to religious reasons, or they just did not want to be in the hospital anymore. I also got to witness a death, and the aftermath of how the family felt and reacted. Some of the religious patients believed that I was sent to help them get better. I always respected everyone's beliefs. In order to serve a community their values, beliefs and culture have to be taken into consideration for all types of interaction.

Since a lot of people did not know English in the hospital, I would barely speak it. I did not want to impose my way of life or language on anyone. But there were some medical residents who knew some English and wanted to practice it. Sometimes they would talk to me in English and I would respond to them in Spanish. They would also ask me how to say certain words and phrases in English. I would also include those who did not know English and I would ask them if they wanted to learn. I told them that there was a point where I did not know English because at home we only spoke Spanish and that I learned it in school. Sometimes I would make a small list of words and phrases for the medical residents and ask them to repeat them in the following days. It seemed to be effective. There are groups of nurses, doctors, and other medical personnel that come from English speaking countries to provide aid to Nicaragua. Therefore it is helpful for the Nicaraguan medical personnel to know some basic English in order to communicate. There were some instances where there were patients who only spoke English,

and the medical residents who were practicing their English got to use it. There are some things that I would help translate for them or clarify, but I was pleased with their progress. Due to the amount of tourism in León, it is very probable that instances such as these will happen again.

By the end of my volunteer experience some of the residents were really comfortable practicing speaking English with me and asking me more about the language. I also used a pdf file on medical Spanish to help them. The medical personnel would ask me how it was to managing to keep my Spanish fluent while living in an English speaking country. My explanation to this is that, since Spanish is my native language I still speak it with my family. I speak Spanish especially with my grandparents, who do not know English. All of my education and work conversations are in English, but I still listen to music in Spanish to hold on to it. I would always tell them how important speaking Spanish is to me because it is part of who I am and it allows me to communicate with more people. I got many questions about how it is to live in the U.S and the school system. I am happy to have sparked their interest in knowing about foreign matters and them feeling comfortable to ask me.

There were so many patients that traveled from all over Nicaragua to come and get attention in León. There are clinics and health centers in rural areas but when there is anything that requires more than primary care the patient has to travel to the hospital. HEODRA has some of the best specialists in Nicaragua. For those patients who traveled so far it was difficult to follow up with them. Dr. Jaime Granera Soto started the school of Orthopedics and Traumatology in León. He studied orthopedics in New York and then came back to Nicaragua with his newfound knowledge. Most of the doctors that I encountered were excellent, charismatic people. The doctors practiced with a smile on their face with no air conditioning, while sometimes lacking resources. The doctors always worked with what they had and somehow managed to make things work. I had many patient interactions while volunteering. In Pediatrics I would talk to the families and really get to know the patients by playing and interacting with them. It was really important to gain their trust. Many times there were patients who were both Pediatric and Orthopedic patients. If they were getting a surgical procedure done, I would ask for permission to be able to go into the operating room with them. This would make the young patients more secure. Sometimes for those patients who were really anxious we would use the technique of telling the patient that their mother was going to come into the surgery room. When the mother would leave we would say she had to go suit up.

The patients were really responsive to me and I got to hear a lot of their stories. I enjoy when patients talk to me because I enjoy getting to know who they are. The residents noticed the care that I had with patients. For example, when putting a cast on a patient I would talk to them and try and distract them so they would not think about the discomfort. I would also get the material ready for the medical residents. Many times there were many patients who needed new cast or splint if the material did not dry correctly. So every day I saw and helped with this matter.

I learned where things were and whom to ask for materials. I also learned most of the names of the staff that were almost always there. In the emergency room I would help the medical residents stay organized with paperwork and also in making sure that they had the supplies needed. Sometimes medical students would come in and help see a patient, suture, or help bandage up patients. In the ER is where I had the most exposure to medical students. We would all work as a team and divide up the tasks. Although I do not know as much as them, I would help out in any way I could and they would also help me learn.

I like to involve myself in what goes on in my surroundings. The Rotary International District 5010 from Texas came to see the hospital and I gave them the tour of Pediatrics. I also told them about the project I was working on with the Rotoract Club. The members donated a bag of supplies for the children to use. I also spoke with many groups of people that came to do mission and medical work at the hospital. They were always surprised to see me speak fluent English and they would always ask where I had learned it. I was always happy to share my experience with them and tell them about Omprakash, JJCF and my background. A group that was amazing was El Camino Mission group. They arrived to the hospital the day of the delivery of the toys; they were passing out coloring books and crayons in Pediatrics. Together we went to the ER and passed out more coloring books and crayons to the kids. They also had a luggage full of individual bags of toiletries to pass out. They asked if I wanted to pass them out during my time volunteering and I accepted. That same day I passed half of the bags out to maternity and the ER. The happiness that came from the patients face was priceless. These little acts of kindness made such a big difference. A couple weeks later I passed out the rest of the bags in maternity, which is one of the busiest departments. People were always surprised that I would voluntarily go to an unknown place by myself to help out. Even the medical residents told me that I was brave for doing this. It was difficult for people to fathom why I would leave the comfort of my home and come to León, Nicaragua. My explanation is: I wanted a different experience from what I have gotten volunteering at the hospitals in the U.S and I love to serve, especially in communities where I can speak my native language. I met a Peace Corps volunteer while grocery shopping one day. She had a friend who is pre-med who wanted to come and help out at HEODRA. I helped him get in contact with Dr. Alemán and he will be volunteering. I hope that my experience will be able to benefit the hospital in a long term and sustainable way.

The last days that I volunteered in the HEODRA were bittersweet. I was very pleased with how much I was able to do and how much I was able to learn. Every morning I thought about how lucky I was to be able to have had this experience. I knew it was going to be hard to go back and not be around patients all day. The medical residents asked me if I wanted a going away get together, but I told them that I really don't like good byes. I told them that I would rather just say until next time. I told them that it was going to be hard to leave, and they told me I

would be missed as well. So as the day went by the doctors, residents and staff gave me good luck wishes for my travels back home. One of the residents told me that rarely does someone come and get along with everyone, but that somehow I was able to manage it.

I was really happy in León, with no air conditioning, no car, and not many of my things with me. I would wash my clothes by hand every week, because I wanted to do things like most Nicaraguans did. I had never done this before, but I watched how it was done once, and I learned. I did not have my iPhone with me; I used a small Nokia every day. Walking everywhere was actually very relaxing, even in the hot sun. I enjoyed seeing everything, and living a calm lifestyle. Still, I wonder, how it is that some of us are so lucky, and others are in such difficult circumstances.

After coming back into the U.S everything has been very different. I was not able to be there when the tile was completely installed in the playroom and the new entrance was done, but I am happy that there are people who will benefit from this change. The Rotoract and Rotary Club of Leon plan to keep fundraising to put tile on the entire floor. Now the project is done as far as I had hope for it to be while I was there. The new playroom was presented at an assembly about Rheumatic Fever where the JJC Foundation and Florida State University was thanked. I have continued to tell my story in meetings with FSU's Global Scholars Program, in which there are, former and interested students in doing service learning abroad. I have also spoken with pre-medical organizations at FSU about the process and funding that went into my experience.