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Travel Grant

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Thanks to my CWIL travel grant, last May I had the opportunity to travel through Honduras on an immersion trip. Saint Mary's College, in conjunction with Heifer International, headed up a program once conducted by Rhodes College of Tennessee. Thus, our group of fifteen, thirteen students from three universities and two instructors, embarked on three weeks of adventure, discomfort and learning invaluable life lessons.

There were many episodes during the trip where I had to take a step back and reflect on the on-going events of the day. When one has to walk several miles to fetch clean water or wonder where one's next meal will come from or worry about the corrupt police seizing one's brother for no reason, reality wears a different face. I discovered the focus of what is important and daily annoyances of the Honduran people vastly differs from what which I have been surrounded with growing up.

I'll never forget the boy's home we visited. Hogar El Diamante is a refuge for young boys, ages 6-16, to get them off of the street. Many of them came from dysfunctional, abusive families and were either involved in gang activity or had drug addictions. Yet, when interacting with the boys and seeing that they were really bundles of pure love, it was hard to imagine the deplorable situations from which they came.

Several of us were fortunate enough to accompany a group of boys on their home visits one afternoon. Each boy is allowed to visit his home about once every three weeks. The ride there took almost an hour, and each home visit was about half an hour, so with six boys and a break for lunch, we had a full day. The car trip allowed us to get to know the boys better, at least those of us that could speak Spanish. One little boy, German,

quickly became attached to me. He talked very openly me about his family. His father and mother were both dead. He had many brothers and sisters because his father had children with both his mother and his mother's sister. Several years back, German's father migrated to America and worked construction in New York to earn money to send back to his family. One day he fell off a building and died. Many times we Americans hear of illegal immigrants, but we never put a human face to them. German's situation made this tragedy real for me. I now had a human face to place on the news reports.

We visited his house second. There to greet us was his grandmother, cousin, little sister and a very strange acting uncle. The house was filthy, the uncle gave everyone the creeps, but what was hardest to endure was witnessing German's interaction with his grandmother, the only supportive adult figure left in German's life. They talked for a bit, but mostly Grandma talked to the social worker. Time passed quickly and soon it was time for us to leave. German hugged his *abuela*, Spanish for grandmother, goodbye...for the last time. She was moving to America and German would never see her again. At twelve years old, German had no one left in his life to care for him. No one.

I comforted German over the next few hours. Within that short time, he went from holding my hand to clinging to my body. I felt overwhelmed by his need. His sudden affection coinciding with the day's tragic event made sense, but I did not feel comfortable with his neediness. I did my best to give him tactile comfort, but toward the end of the trip I asked another girl, Katie, to sit next to German for the ride back, his need was becoming too overbearing. Upon returning to Hogar, I tried to give German the same attention as I did the other boys, showing no favoritism. Yet it was so hard, knowing his lot. Although I am sure there were others with just as unfortunate circumstances, I witnessed German's.

One of the most striking and memorable times at Hogar was with German on the last day. Before our mini-fiesta, German pulled me aside and sang me a Spanish love song. The lyrics were so beautiful and his raspy voice and pleading eyes are forever locked into my memory. Then, the most pure act of generosity I experienced in Honduras and quite possibly ever, German bought me not one but two loaves of bread from their bakery. I was intending to buy them myself and he accompanied me to the store. I was shocked when he insisted on paying for them and tried to ask for only one loaf, but he would not hear of it. I tried to refuse, to fight his offer but I did not want to offend him. I know that it is as much an honor to be able to give a gift as it is a virtue to be able to receive a gift gracefully. Yet it was so hard to put aside the idea that this little Honduran boy, who had essentially nothing and no one, buy *me* two loaves of bread. Me, who had *so* much in comparison. What's more, German paid with the ten lempira his Grandmother gave him that afternoon.

I was a witness to many things in Honduras. A culture and lifestyle completely different from my own, it challenged me to think in a different way and consider different perspectives. German demonstrated for me the true essence of generosity, and the sheer power love can have. His hugs, song, bread are only the impressions of something much more lasting. Not even the most esteemed university in the nation with the most knowledgeable teacher could have taught me what German did. Although I was only able to give to German very little, his memory and spirit give me strength and impetus to rise to other occasions and I hopefully can extend myself a little more each time. Thank you CWIL, for the opportunity to experience Honduras and the opportunity of getting knowing German...the face to which I attribute so much. So very much.