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Traveling alone to Guatemala, I carried fears of being unwelcome by the people, or failing to adjust to all of their customs and routines of daily living, but my fears quickly vanished when I met my host family. In just eight weeks, I became part of Guatemalan culture.

My host family welcomed me into their home as if I was their own daughter. My host mother, Violeta, invited me to go to the markets with her. We bought fresh corn to steam overnight in order to make the dough for tortillas. She then taught me how to mold tortillas in the palm of my hand and toss them on a griddle. I became excited with the progress of my tortillas until they finally resembled round ones like hers. I enjoyed cooking dinner a few nights a week with Violeta and her husband Rafael. They own a small restaurant, so making a meal for them was like creating a work of art. I remember Rafael telling me that the presentation of the dish was just as important as the taste. Violeta also taught me how to prepare a couple of typical Guatemalan dishes: a main dish called *Pepian* and a dessert called *Mole*. I prepared *Mole* for the children at *Camino Seguro*, where I volunteered. These are a few customs that I learned to make my own.

I felt welcomed by the teachers at *Camino Seguro*. I will always remember how one of the teachers greeted me as if I was an old friend. She kissed my cheek, which is the customary Spanish greeting.

At the project, my experience of helping street children with school was both challenging and rewarding. One of the biggest challenges for me was helping one little girl in particular become motivated in her studies. The first time I worked with her, she

used a lot of foul language because she was frustrated with the amount of work that she had. Weeks later, I was encouraging her with the progress she was making on her homework. When she finished, I said that I was proud of her. She looked at me and asked, “You’re proud of me?” When I nodded yes, her face began to glow. It may have been the first time that she had heard this. Needless to say, I became very attached to her and the other girls with whom I worked and played. On my last day, the girls gave me a going away party and cards expressing their gratitude. The little girl with whom I spent much time gave me a card that said, “I love you, and I will miss you very much.”

There are a few other memories that I will always treasure. The most significant for me is being invited to attend a wedding with my host family. A friend of theirs was getting married, so they insisted that I come with them. Before going to the wedding, Violeta and I went shopping for the wedding present. I felt just like her daughter because we had frequent conversations about faith and what it means to be an adult woman; we cooked together; and now I was going to the wedding of one her friends. It was such an awesome experience! I have never felt so immersed in another culture. At the reception, I was surprised to learn that the bride throws the bouquet of flowers three times. The first two times, whoever catches it, gives it back to the bride because these two times are considered jokes; only on the third throw does the woman who catches it, keep the bouquet. The same is done with regard to the groom and the garter. Also at the reception, I enjoyed learning how to dance salsa, cumbia, and merengue. Another important memory is listening to my youngest host brother play the guitar for me. Bryan, who is nine years old, played a few Red Hot Chili Peppers’ songs for me because he is learning how to play the guitar. He was just like my own little brother because he drew me

pictures of Spiderman, told me jokes, and asked me to play games with him. I still keep in contact with my host family through email and am planning on returning to Guatemala within two years to visit them because they became my second family.