

Final Report

Abriendo Mentas, Potrero, Costa Rica: May-August, 2012

Since leaving Potrero and the Abriendo Mentas community just over two weeks ago now, I have had time to briefly visit my family, make a 12 hour drive back to Indiana, move into a new apartment, and start my job and school again. To say the least, I've been really thrown back into my life as grad student and haven't had much time to reflect on my summer volunteering abroad. At least once a day though, I end up thinking, "I was in Costa Rica two weeks ago, speaking Spanish, teaching English, and walking everywhere on the dusty, dirt road." Here are some of my first impressions about being back in the United States and what parts of Playa Potrero will stick with me.

To be honest, I was feeling ready to come home the week before I left. I was excited to see my family, to move into my new apartment, and to start school and work again. Any feeling of welcome was pretty much shattered at the Miami Airport in the Immigration line. As I stood in line waiting for my turn, the immigration officer began shouting at the man in front of me. His two comments "I'm not talking to myself here. Answer me!" and "You are in a foreign country, you need to speak English!" gave me the exact opposite of any welcome into the US. I had spent the summer being the person who sometimes needed a question repeated or had to ask for people to speak more slowly, and here I was watching someone from my country completely demean a non-English speaking person. The immigration officer was perfectly cordial to me and waved me on through with no difficulties. Experiences like this make me feel like cross-cultural interactions and exchanges are even more important for everyone in the world to have.

After the initial "non-welcome" back into the U.S., I pretty quickly adapted back to the culture here except for a few things. Here are some things that were really different from Potrero during the first few days back:

- Air Conditioning- Potrero had one air-conditioned store in town (the ice cream shop!) and even though it was hot, we all eventually adjusted to the heat and I loved being able to wear hot weather clothes all day long. Back home, the stores are frigid! I end up having to take a sweatshirt with me into any store and still freeze if I'm wearing shorts. It's a total waste of energy to keep buildings that cold and it also makes the heat feel so much worse here.
- So many people on the road!- Potrero had cars driving through it regularly, but we could still walk down the road and traffic didn't exist. It was so different to see everybody driving everywhere and just so many people out and about in general.
- GIANT stores!- I even had this shock when I went to the big cities in Costa Rica. Living in Potrero, I got used to the little tiny grocery stores and walking into one of our mega grocery stores is completely overwhelming. Research has shown that excessive choice paralyzes people's decision-making skills. My first trip to the grocery store was extremely overwhelming. Why do we need to have 10 brands of every type of product being sold?
- Speaking English- While I spoke a lot of English this summer with other volunteers and when

teaching classes, it is different to have everybody speak English. I got really used to speaking different languages with different people, and it's just a weird feeling to be able to use my native language with everyone again.

One of the biggest things I learned from my experience with AM was about the challenges the rural community faces in terms of economic change and language development. Because Potrero's jobs are changing from fishing/farming to tourism, English is becoming a necessary skill. Traveling around the country, I saw this same need, but the lack of resources in rural Costa Rica presents more challenges to community members. Rural education was not something I was particularly interested in before working in Potrero, so I'm very glad that I was able to live in a place very different from anywhere I had lived before.

Although traveling was not what I went to Costa Rica for, my two weeks traveling were a highlight of the whole experience. I was lucky to be at AM during the break, which allowed me to take this time away from Potrero. In addition to being able to enjoy some of the beautiful parks in Costa Rica, I visited some of the major cities in the country. Through my time traveling, I got to meet a variety of Costa Rican people and have conversations about their beliefs and views on various topics. This allowed me to gain a better overall understanding of Costa Rica as a country, and what challenges the urban Costa Rican communities face. Had I not traveled to other parts of the country, I would feel like I only knew about Potrero (which is fine also), but visiting other parts of the country was also very beneficial for my understanding of the culture and people there.

One of the highlights of my time in Costa Rica was teaching a technology class to two women. One of these women had been my host mom the first month I was in Potrero and the other was one of the kindergarten student's mothers. They both wanted to learn to use the computer so that they could help their children with school. They were also concerned about security with sites such as facebook and wanted to be able to understand what types of activities their children were involved in. These two women had never used a computer before and my favorite memory is of Judith browsing the Internet. I had taken some time to set up an email account with my host mom, so when Judith was left to play around with Google. When I finished setting up the email account, I asked Judith what she was doing. Her answer was: "Conociendo Latinoamerica" (getting to know Latin America). She had learned how to search Google Images and was typing in all of the different countries in Central and South America! It was amazing to watch my two students be so excited about looking at pictures from countries near them. Potrero doesn't have a library and books at the school are limited so having the Internet opened up a huge number of resources to them. It was really interesting seeing how, on one hand, Potrero is so isolated from much of Costa Rica and other countries around it, but also so connected and that the community members want to know about places around them.

I think the hardest thing about coming home from an experience abroad is figuring out how to hold onto the experience. A person ends up spending lots of time with people going through the same thing as they are, and then they come home and no one understands. While people are of course interested in hearing about your stories, they are only exciting for so long and it's sometimes impossible to really explain what life was like in another place. I have experienced some of this and my goal is to stay connected with other volunteers I worked with and to keep up with AM's news. I also plan to stay very involved with Omprakash in any way I can. The opportunities available are amazing and I want to let as many people know about them as

possible. Now that I am back in school, I will be asking various departments and offices to post the Omprakash website on the Indiana University website and to hold presentations talking about how to volunteer abroad through Omprakash too! I am also hoping to let any potential volunteers know about JJCF because it gives great opportunities for people to participate in volunteer work anywhere in the world.