

Midterm Report

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

At the Omprakash Cross-Cultural Conference last week, two videographers interviewed me about volunteering through Omprakash and what it has meant to me. One of their questions was "If you could give future volunteers advice about volunteering abroad, what would it be?" My answer was that I would want volunteers to really consider their goals and realistic expectations for their experience before they and also to continuously monitor themselves in terms of whether they are achieving their goals and meeting their hopes for the short time they have in the community abroad. I have tried to take my own advice this summer and it has been interesting comparing my expectations and actual realities in Potero. A lot has gone as I expected or hoped, but a lot has also turned out differently than I thought. The following list includes some things that haven't gone quite as expected:

Expectation: "I'm going to Costa Rica. I'm going to get to practice my Spanish skills all day long"

Reality: I came to Costa Rica to volunteer with Abriendo Mentos, a really organized, established non-profit that hosts tons of volunteers year round. While I chose AM because of its impressive programs and organization, so did many other English-speaking volunteers, some of whom have limited Spanish knowledge. I spend much of my day in the office with other English-speakers so I have not gotten the Spanish immersion I thought I would. Also, the programs I'm working on here are about English education so I work on the English curriculum in the office and am supposed to speak as much English in the classroom with the children and adults in class. In order to help me achieve goal of practicing my Spanish, I took some private Spanish lessons, which were really beneficial and overall, my Spanish has improved from talking in the community and taking the classes.

Expectation: "I'm going to a tropical country. Fresh fruit and smoothies are going to be cheap and plentiful!"

Reality: I live in the Guanacaste province of Costa Rica in a small beach community where rice and beans are much more available than fruit. There are small grocery stores with mangos, papayas and bananas, but they are more expensive than I expected and the closest fruit stand is a 20 minute walk.

Expectation: "I'm going to live near the beach. I'll be able to go out hang out and swim all the time!"

Reality: I do live near the beach and I go regularly, but not nearly as much as I thought I would. Between meetings and classes during the week, I've been busy here. During the week I have to really make an effort and a plan if I want to make it to the beach.

Many days I've been really busy, but have just run down to the beach to take a quick swim to cool off, which has been nice. The past two weeks (my last two weeks), I have gone to the beach every single day. This has been a challenge, but it's been absolutely worth it!

These disappointments or different realities than I expected aren't necessarily bad (and there have been tons of good surprises too!) but I think they show that when we come to volunteer, we need to be flexible and realize that not all of our expectations will be met. Another thing they make me realize is how hard a volunteer needs to work to make sure it's the experience they want. For example, once I realized that I wouldn't be speaking as much Spanish as I thought I would, I started taking some private Spanish lessons to improve my language skills. Nearly anything is possible to achieve when volunteering abroad, but it might take some work and dedication to fulfill both your work goals and personal goals during the time abroad.