

Working in Portero, Costa Rica at Abriendo Mentas: My first few weeks

I have been in Portero working at Abriendo Mentas for about two and a half weeks now. I've attended meetings about the various jobs here and I have been going to all of the kids' classes in the afternoon. I also had my first meeting with Meradith, the director of AM, about my goals and interests in my time here. I didn't get to start many of the tasks I am working on because the internet was out this afternoon, so I am writing from home on my computer (I can use the internet tomorrow to post this). Now that I know a little bit more about the organization, I wanted to explain some of the programs that run weekly and some of the projects I work on.

One of the primary goals of AM is to teach members of the community- both children and adults- English and this is one of the main projects I will be working on. I have been to two days of kids' classes so far and will begin working with adults next week. The kids' classes are broken up into pre-k, K/1, 2/3, 4/5, and 6th grades. Each class works on the same unit mostly learning vocabulary and simple sentences, but the older kids' classes try to expand upon concepts learned earlier in other grades. AM uses the school's textbook and English curriculum as a guide so that our classes build upon what students are being exposed to in school. Classes are pretty basic, but at least they are being exposed to English and we speak as much in English as we can in the classes. We also do many art projects and play games and sing songs to get them excited about learning because the schools use pure rote memorization to teach.

I will also be co-teaching (and eventually leading) an adult English class. I think the class I will be working with consists of very beginning students. I am particularly excited about this because I will get to know some adults in the community and will be able to practice my Spanish with them when I see them around town.

My other project is a bit more abstract than teaching the English classes. In the meeting today, Meradith and I talked about how I could help encourage more people in Portero to become part of AM (sending their kids or taking English or computer classes). I asked my host family (who is involved with AM) why more people didn't get involved because the program is free for anyone. Janet (host mom/grandma) explained to me that some families don't have *confianza* "confidence" in the program. They see other children playing games and having fun with the volunteers and do not think that the children are learning much. This shows how limited a view of teaching methodology the people of Portero have. The parents of the kids probably have only ever known a school where students sit in their desk and copy things from the board that need to be memorized, so our creative teaching methods are new to them. This is really unfortunate because it means that the children are missing out on valuable English exposure and learning. My job is to somehow organize some sort of community assembly to explain more about the program to people and to help them understand that our teaching methods. People here also have little understanding of the importance of starting to learn a foreign language young, which is also something that would be important to explain to them. I'm not quite sure where to start with this project, but we think it would be very valuable in bringing our programs to more people in Portero.

Other projects that I might be involved in are the Women's group and teaching computer classes. The Women's group meets once a week and is learning how to make bags out of recycled materials so that they can sell them to make a little money for themselves. We are also offering basic computer classes for people so that they have some understanding of how to use a computer, make a resume, help their kids with homework, etc.

So far working with Abriendo Mentas has been rewarding, but also hard work. Now that I have been here for a while, all of the kids say hi to me when I walk around town. I'm also getting to slowly know some of the parents that drop their kids off at class as well. I am so grateful to JJCF for allowing me to come to Costa Rica to work with this organization and will write again soon with an update of my projects here.