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University Honors Program

Nicaragua Experience Reflection

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For this self-designed experience, I traveled to the country of Nicaragua where I spent a week working in the community, living with a local family, and exploring the beauty and culture of the country. During the day while in Nicaragua, I worked hands-on with other students from the University of Cincinnati as well as faculty and staff members with both adults and children in a community in Granada. As a Communication Sciences and Disorders major, I worked with both children and adults, carrying out speech evaluations alongside upperclassmen and faculty. I also spent time in the community of Solidaridad where I worked and played with children who came from less than ideal home environments.

Aside from the daily service I contributed to throughout the week, I was involved in a great deal of cultural immersion. The family I was be placed with through Viva Nicaragua, a non-government organization that collaborates with institutions and organizations in the southwest of Nicaragua to meet volunteer and internship needs, only spoke Spanish. Though I was enrolled in Spanish courses in high school and had taken extra time leading up to this trip to study and practice my Spanish skills in order to better communicate, the real practice came from actually having to use my Spanish skills day in and day out.

There will also be time for me to explore the community on my own and spend time sightseeing around the city. I plan to take full advantage of this free time to visit local shops and restaurants as well as meet and converse with local people. As my date of departure nears, I will have a detailed itinerary to provide. Aside from the preparations leading up to departure, the trip itself will total approximately 170 hours of cultural immersion.

The most significant part of this experience was the interaction I had with the Nicaraguan people. I was nervous to travel to a country where I didn’t thoroughly know the language, and I had assumed that this language barrier would hinder my ability to interact fully with the Nicaraguan people and really get a feel for the culture during the short time I was there. I was afraid of the frustration I would face in trying to communicate my needs with others and had concerns of meeting people who would be frustrated with me and my lack of Spanish knowledge. However, I couldn’t have been more wrong. Every single person I met in Nicaragua, no matter if they knew English or not, was patient and kind when it came to trying to communicate with me. My homestay mom, siblings, and housekeeper would repeat themselves or slow down their speech if I wasn’t comprehending and were all very patient when I tried to talk to them. If the message was lost between us somewhere, my family was great at trying to communicate in different ways or even look up what they were trying to say in English to help us out. This was especially crucial to my roommates and me when we had upset stomachs and our homestay mom wanted us to let her know what we wanted to eat and how we were feeling throughout the trip. Outside of the home, whether in the market, at someone’s home, or at a work site in the community, every person was willing to work with me to communicate. Though it would have been nice to be able to more freely speak with the people I met, not once did I feel like the language barrier held me back from helping others and experiencing the culture.

Before going on this experience, I had expected to spend my working days in a clinic in Granada. I had prepared posters and information on breast feeding and was set on educating women in the clinic each day. However, upon arriving in Nicaragua, I realized how flexible I had to be and different my plans were. I did not step foot in the clinic once and instead did not know how my days were to be spent until the night before. I learned how to go with the flow and be flexible in my planning and executing each day, much as the Nicaraguan people are flexible.

Through my pre-departure preparation as well as my actual experience, I have made great strides in meeting my global studies learning outcomes identified in my proposal. Through this experience, I planned to possess a global literacy, including knowledge of geography, history, current world issues and similarities and differences among culture and to interact with individuals from different cultures and express a sensitivity, appreciation, and respect for the complex range of experiences of diverse peoples. Throughout spring semester, I was enrolled in a three credit hour course that focused on Nicaragua and its culture. I completed course work and research on Nicaraguan food, religion, healthcare, and cultural norms. While in Nicaragua, I really got to experience firsthand a lot of the things I had researched. I ate traditional Nicaraguan food, visited their churches, and worked in healthcare facilities. I also visited El Coyotepe Fortress, a fort in Masaya, Nicaragua, built originally to protect the city during times of unrest, but was later turned into a political prison. Many of the people I encountered while in Nicaragua had friends or family members tortured or killed at El Coyotepe, so to be able to walk within the walls and hear the story of its horrendous past was bone chilling and incredibly memorable. In addition to working with the people of Nicaragua, visiting this fortress really helped me to hone in on a sensitivity, appreciation, and respect for the people of Nicaragua and the hardships they have endured.

For this project, I explored several different readings to prepare and gain background information on Nicaragua. I consulted “The Healthcare Professional’s Guide to Clinical Cultural Competence” by Rani Srivastava, as well as several chapters in “Ethics of Healthcare: A Guide for Clinical Practice” by Raymond Groves and John Edge that deal with the importance of cultural sensitivity while caring for others. With a focus on client-centered care, “The Healthcare Professional’s Guide to Clinical Cultural Competence” provides an introduction to developing cultural competence in the health care setting. This book covers both theory and practice, and begins with a strong foundational model for understanding culture. It then introduces general knowledge on culture which can be provided to a variety of settings, and ends with clinical applications illustrating how to apply knowledge and awareness to a variety of populations. I also read Steven F. White’s and Esthela Calderon’s, “Culture and Customs of Nicaragua”. This book was supplemental to my coursework on Nicaragua and delved deeper into the country’s religion, social norms, folklore, literature, media, and art. Becoming familiar with the country’s vibrant culture genuinely prepared me for interacting with the people of Nicaragua, especially in their churches and artisan markets I visited. I also explored Thomas W. Walker’s book, “Nicaragua: Living in the Shadow of the Eagle”. Vastly different from White and Calderon’s overview of the positive, vibrant, and artistic culture of Nicaragua, Walker explores the darker aspects of Nicaragua’s past such as the Sandinista Revolution and the Somoza dictatorship, as well as the politics, economics and foreign relations of the country, specifically the United States’ intervention in the country. This reading was brought to life while I was deep inside El Coyotepe fortress, standing in the same torture chambers and experiencing the same eerie silence and darkness that political prisoners experienced in the recent past.

Since returning home from Nicaragua, I have been integrating what I learned from this experience into my everyday life. Being an outsider who didn’t fully speak the language in the country really gave me a feel for how people who immigrate to America and do not know English well must feel. I’ve developed a better understanding of people coming to America and struggling for a better life, and just how ignorant it is to expect them to learn the language so quickly. Every person I met in Nicaragua was kind, patient, and understanding of my struggles to communicate, so I am trying to emulate that same kindness if ever faced with a non-English speaker in the United States. I have especially been able to put this into play and show more patience and understanding while communicating at my retail job where I often have customers who do not speak English well. I also feel like I have a better overall understanding and compassion for people in less than ideal situations, specifically children who act out or misbehave due to problems at home.

Though I have shared my learning informally with friends and family upon my return, I was also fortunate enough to present my learnings to children at a local elementary school. A fifth grade class at St. Dominic School in Cincinnati followed me during my week in Nicaragua via photos and brief updates I gave them. Once home, I produced a Prezi presentation filled with photos and information about my trip which I presented to the class during their last week of school. It was my hope to inspire the children to open their minds to study abroad opportunities once they hit college as well as provide them with some basic information about Nicaragua and the culture. I also focused some of my presentation of the stereotypes regarding impoverished countries and the Hispanic culture, and did my best to use my photos and stories to eradicate any negative stereotypes they held about the culture.

All in all, this experience is one that I will never forget. I feel as though my life has been enriched by my short week abroad and I am definitely considering returning to Nicaragua in the future to experience more of the culture.