

Roshni Naik, '09  
**San Lucas Toliman, Guatemala**



For six weeks, I spent my summer of service in rural Guatemala on Lake Atitlan. Lake Atitlan is one of the biggest lakes in Guatemala, and it is surrounded by multiple volcanoes. The lake itself was formed by an erupting volcano that collapsed and caved in. The towns surrounding the lake are populated with indigenous people of Mayan descent, and I served these people during my stay.

For the first half of my summer of service, I stayed in a small town called San Lucas Toliman and volunteered at mobile health clinics in surrounding rural towns. I worked with a group of physicians and physician assistants from University of Wisconsin and served as Spanish translator. We traveled to rural towns and set up a clinic with the limited resources available and supplies brought from the U.S. For example, in this picture, we used a little shed as patient's room. About 100 local children and adults visited this clinic.



I used my Spanish skills to check people into the clinic, and I wrote down patients' stats such as weight, temperature, and blood pressure. Also, I did blood glucose tests on people over the age of 30 to see if they were at risk for diabetes. Diabetes is one of the biggest diseases that affects the rural population, and it was crucial to test blood glucose of all adults over the age of 30 in order to educate them on how to control their blood glucose levels. After the blood glucose test, I talked to the patients and suggested ways to reduce blood glucose levels by eating healthy.





In addition to educating patients about diabetes, I educated children about dental hygiene. I passed out toothbrushes to children and taught them how to brush their teeth correctly. Also I did mouth fluoride treatments to help prevent tooth decay, but unfortunately many children had the signs of tooth decay already. That's why it was extremely crucial to teach them the importance of brushing teeth correctly and routinely.





The mobile health clinics were the most valuable experience I ever had because I saw the lack of health education and prevention among the rural poor population in Guatemala. I saw many cases of infections and illnesses that could have been prevented with proper hygiene. In addition, I saw the lack of nutrition and hydration of not only children but also adults. We passed out vitamins to all people coming to the clinic, but in reality unfortunately it was just a temporary fix.

For the second half of my summer of service, I volunteered at a medical clinic, named Hospitalito Atitlan, in the town Santiago Atitlan, which is about a 30 minute drive from San Lucas Toliman. Hospitalito Atitlan is a clinic that is run by Guatemalan and American physicians and administrators. The original clinic was destroyed by Hurricane Stan a couple of years ago, and the clinic now is in fact originally a backpacker's hostel.



The clinic consists of an emergency room, clinic, lab, medical bodega, and pharmacy. I assisted Guatemalan nurses with check-ins and I had the chance to learn the local Mayan language, Tzutuhil, that is spoken in Santiago. Surprisingly, the majority of patients in Santiago did not speak Spanish even though Spanish is Guatemala's official language, and I found that it is common that rural Guatemalans speak a distinct Mayan language of their town. Besides check-ins, I helped organize the pharmacy and the medical bodega. The medical bodega was full of donated supplies from the United States, but the majority of it was in a clutter. I organized needles, sutures kits, tubes, etc. and helped to inventory. In addition, I shadowed the physicians at the clinic and saw the extent of the pregnancy crisis in rural Guatemalans. Many of the

woman at the clinic had their first babies in their late teens/early twenties, and continued to have several children. Consequently, pregnancy complications were common among many women.





In all, my summer of service experience was rewarding. I learned the extent of the lack of health facilities and the need of health education and prevention among rural Guatemalans. In the future, I hope that I can return to Guatemala and serve as a physician and help more people in need. I admire the complex, unique culture of Guatemala and feel blessed to have the opportunity to explore this beautiful country.

