

OAXACA, MEXICO

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I spent my summer of service in the colorful city of Oaxaca de Juárez. Oaxaca de Juárez is the capital of the Mexican state of Oaxaca. It is a city nestled high up in the valleys of the Sierra Madre mountain ranges. It is a city known for its diverse indigenous influences. These influences are embedded into the lifestyle in many different ways from the unique craftwork and flavorful cooking all the way to political messages showcased in the colorful street art and loud protests at the Zócalo.

For my time in Oaxaca, I stayed with a small host family in a separate room they provided. My group (Erik & Samir) and I would have breakfast with our family everyday before starting my day at the center I volunteered at. Their house was located near the center. Every morning, I would walk up through the hills to reach Centro de Esperanza. Centro de Esperanza is a learning center that sponsors about six hundred school children. The sponsorship covers things like school fees, supplies, uniforms and meals for the children. The children are enrolled in a variety of school systems...some schools are located within the city-center while others are in neighboring villages.



My younger host brother and I preparing to walk in a parade.



My host family and I on my last day in Oaxaca



A group picture on my last day.

At the center I worked primarily with students enrolled in schools located within the city. In the morning we would work mainly with primary school students. My responsibilities included providing homework help, translating the children's sponsor letters from Spanish into English, and preparing playful and educational activities. Often, we chose to read or play games that challenged the students to think. Occasionally I helped out in the kitchen with breakfast and lunch preparations. If the weather permitted, we would also take the children to an old railroad track that had been converted to a museum and a playground. The children loved spending some time at the playground.



Reading with Rocio



A little play...a little yoga.

After the morning session, Erik, Samir, and I would grab a quick bite at Señora Patricia's small café. We came across Señora Patricia's restaurant on our very first day. We had such a wonderful experience on our first day because she treated us with such respect and compassion. As a result, we decided to eat lunch at her café everyday.



Señora Patricia and I at her restaurant

Señora Patricia took care of us like we were her own children. After finding out I was a vegetarian, she would prepare me special meals because she wanted me to have a healthy meal at least once during my day. I think my favorite thing about Señora Patricia was how easily her passion and love for cooking could be felt simply by taking a bite out of one of her savory dishes.



One of Señora Patricia's dishes

In the afternoons, I tutored secondary and university school children. The tutoring



sessions mainly focused on teaching English. I tutored students with a ranging background in English. My favorite part about my tutoring sessions was hearing about my students' background stories and inspirations behind learning English. One of my university students, Karla (pictured to the left), had a dream of working in a field involving international relations. She loved learning about other countries so I often structured my lessons in a way that would help her communicate with foreigners and learn about their countries. I had two other students, Jose and Karla, who described their dreams about joining the army. Karla explained how being able to communicate in English would be extremely important and helpful to her when she applied,

especially since she wanted work in the Air Force.

Later on during my summer of service, my group and I added on a second service

site. At this site we taught English to single mothers. The center provided these lessons to mothers for free. Many times they would also work out ways to accommodate transportation for the mothers who otherwise may not be able to afford it. I had the opportunity to teach Refugio (pictured to the right). Refugio is a very loving mother who wanted to learn English so that she could better communicate with her



customers. Refugio is a seamstress and since Oaxaca City has a large tourist population, she often finds herself having to communicate in English. She explained

how learning English would be extremely helpful in cases, for instance, where she makes customized orders.

There was one thing that surprised me quite a bit. For a city with strong political views and a reputation of starting heated protests, the number of smiles I encountered hardly ever revealed the brutal realities that many natives experience. Even while volunteering at the children's center, I never could have imagined the types of harsh lives some of the children experience. My first realization of the value these smiles held was while walking back to my home in the pouring rain one evening. It was eleven o'clock at night and there was this 8-year-old boy who was still in his school uniform trying to sell some handmade shawls to anyone walking by. That boy was Ishmael. The same Ishmael who came to the center that morning smiling and continued to smile even after being scolded for not finishing his homework. Never once did he let his smile reveal that he probably couldn't finish his homework because he was out trying to make a sale until who knows what time. Forget about his homework, Ishmael probably didn't even have much time to sleep at night. But, his smile never complained about this.

Shortly after that point, I became aware of a lot of the realities of the children at the center. From Luis Mario and Juanito who had gone into hiding for three months because they needed to run from their father to Magdalena who goes to sleep hungry in a bed with her dying grandfather because her family has only two beds two share between five people and no money to buy food. All the children, regardless of the conditions they seem to face, hardly ever missed an opportunity to smile. I think that truly became the most important lesson Oaxaca gave me. The children at the center showed me how important smiling can be.



Juanito (left) and Luis Mario (right) smiling and multiplying

Dedicating the next couple pages to smiling...



Magdalena completing a puzzle



Salsa lessons with Javier



Smiling because that's his Lego tower



Packing sugar to be used the kitchen



Luis smiling at the thought of touching the sky



Our day at the ferrocarril



Life can be quite difficult at times. I don't think any part of this world is exempt from at least a little harsh reality. Some places and the people there may have different sets of hardships than other places, but regardless of where you are I think having to face life during a difficult phase can be quite daunting. It might even feel like there is no hope. But what I think made Oaxaca so special for me was seeing how the Oaxaqueños really embody this idea that no matter what obstacle might be ahead, it doesn't have to take away from an opportunity to enjoy life. Even if something seems trivial it doesn't matter. If it makes you smile, then celebrate it. Whether it's through a parade or a laugh, just celebrate it. It is through this action of smiling and celebrating the little moments of life that we can build up our courage and ability to face that daunting reality ahead of us.

During my time in Oaxaca I found how a smile truly holds a special strength. That strength is endurance. The endurance to not only withstand and cope with our difficulties, but also to find ways to enjoy life, even the brutal parts of it.