

Samir's Summer of Service 2017: Oaxaca, Mexico

This summer I spent 7 weeks in Oaxaca, Mexico. The experience was unlike anything I had done before and it was far more challenging than I ever imagined. However, it left an undeniable impact on me as a person and I will forever be grateful for this incredibly humbling experience.

Erik, Divya, and I worked with Centro de Esperanza Infantil, a support center for local children, run by Oaxaca Streetchildren Grassroots. As the name implies, this center serves children below the poverty level and provides them the opportunity to attend school and receive nutritious meals and homework help at the center when they are not in school. We helped with homework, taught English, ran activities, and took the kids to the park. While this may seem easy on the surface level, it was sometimes very challenging. We would work with the kids from 9am-4pm every single day, but then see some of our students as young as 7 out in the street at night, alone, selling trinkets to tourists for their parents. They would be unsupervised, hungry, and doing this for hours on end, even in the pouring rain. On the surface, Oaxaca is a beautiful city. It would be easy for a tourist to come and see nothing but beautiful historic buildings, incredible food, and happy people. But, after spending 7 weeks there, we realized the immense struggle that is underneath this all. Venturing outside of the tourist center reveals another world, one that is far more representative of the reality of most of the people of Oaxaca. Even still, there is great hope.

I made incredible relationships with so many of the kids. They would see me in the morning and run up to me with open arms. I learned about what they were learning in

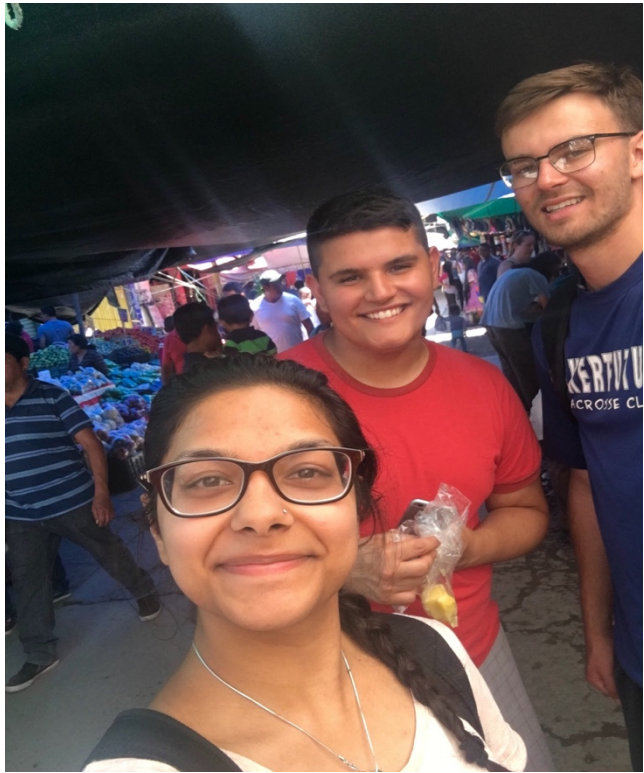
school, what their home life was like, what they aspired to be and do, and so many aspects of their lives. I am so grateful for meeting every person I met.

In the evenings, we taught English to single mothers at a local language school. I spent so much of this experience talking to the mothers and listening. Just listening. I heard about what they thought about Trump. I listened to the story of Flor, my primary student, who crossed the border illegally, broke her leg, and laid in a ditch for days in order to make it into San Diego. She lived there for 4 years before returning to Oaxaca. I came to an understanding (or at least a better understanding) of what really matters. So many of the things I stress about and obsess over will be so insignificant in just a small amount of time.

My next step is to return. I realized so many things that I could do if I only had more time. 7 weeks was a lot, but not nearly enough. The center that we worked at relies 100% on volunteers to take care of the kids. There is no paid staff to care for them, only to run the office. So, on days when there is only 1 volunteer, all the pressure falls on them. Or worse yet, when no volunteers come, the kids are left on their own. This center would benefit immensely from having at least one paid staff member to care for these kids. I would love to be able to fund raise enough so that the center could do this. It would change the experience of these children so much. I also gave my e-mail to all my English students who will be sending me e-mails monthly that I will correct and reply to, so that they can continue to practice with me.

This trip was life-changing. As cliché as that sounds, it is quite true. I never felt so connected to people in such a short amount of time. I will miss everyone dearly, but I know that I will see them again. Oaxaca now has such a special place in my heart and I cannot wait

to go back as a physician to help in a healthcare-related way. I am eternally grateful to have had this incredible opportunity.



TOP: On the weekends, Erik, Divya, and I would explore local markets! Oaxaca has fantastic cuisine and many unique fruits/snacks to try!
BTTM: Erik and I reading with Juan, one of our favorite students!



Here, I am trying to stop Cristian, one of our youngest students, from eating Legos. Once he stopped eating them, he became a master at building towers! (Below!)



Some of our students in front of street art! Oaxaca is filled with street art that reflects the culture and politics of the city.



The central courtyard of Centro de Esperanza Infantil, where we worked every day!



Thank you, Siena, for giving me this incredible opportunity.

