

Irene Joseph

Summer of Service- Kathmandu, Nepal

I was privileged to spend my Summer of Service in the small, but beautiful city of Kathmandu, Nepal with Samantha Sattler and Alexa Trovato. It was not until after I returned back to the States that I realized that this trip was in fact a privilege, for during my six weeks in Nepal, I learned more about myself, and the world I live in, than I could have imagined.

We spent the first half of our service trip teaching English to elementary and middle school kids in the impoverished town of Balaju Heights. The children came to school in their neatly ironed uniforms, the girls with multicolored bows in their braided hair and the boys with navy neckties, and so their economic standings were not evident at face value; after interacting with the students and teachers, however, the incomparable differences in my opportunities versus theirs became blatantly obvious. The children rarely did their homework and did poorly on their class exams, and this angered me so much in the earlier weeks. As a child, the thought of not doing my homework or getting straight As on my exams would not even cross my mind because of the pressure my parents placed on me, and so I could not fathom walking into school every day without trying. That was until I learned why these children did not have the same mentality for school that I had—after living in a circle of poverty, being first in class or landing a prestigious career as a physician was not on their list of priorities. I learned that many of the children had alcoholics for fathers and their mothers worked as housemaids in far away towns, leaving them responsible for most of the household chores, such as cooking, cleaning, and taking care of younger siblings. At 21, I can barely make myself a bowl of

cereal, and there I was, trying to teach English to eight-year-old girls who could feed families of six. I also noticed that many of the boys were far more educated than the girls, and the teachers were not at all concerned about this, as “the girls will get married by the time they are 15, anyway”. I could not digest how different my upbringing was from theirs—how I grew up not understanding that the expectations my family placed on me were more like blessings.



During this time, we lived with a family half a mile away from the school, and here, we were exposed to much of the Nepali culture. We learned how to wash laundry by hand, cook many traditional Nepali dishes, and we also became decently comfortable with common Nepali phrases. Along with learning the Nepali national anthem and other patriotic songs, we learned dances and heard prayers. While the culture shock was not too drastic for me, as I come from an Indian background, it was different enough to allow me to really appreciate and understand that while we are all so different, we are all still the same people who enjoy trying new foods, spending time with our families, and building new relationships.



The second half of our service trip was extremely trying, but it was during this half where I felt the most growth and was beyond humbled. We spent our time living in a children's home half an hour outside Kathmandu, in a very secluded village called Taukhel. We lived in a small home with 20 children, six adults, and a chicken, and while I spent the first few days strongly considering going back to our previous service site due to our new living conditions, I now would do anything to spend just one more day with these children. It was while I was in the children's home that I learned the meaning of selflessness, kindness, and appreciation. These children, who have been nothing but "abandoned" over and over again from their parents, families, and every volunteer who's ever walked through their door, welcomed us into their home with the most open arms and hearts. They showed us their love through their games, jokes, songs, and dances despite the fact that we could not exchange any more than five or six phrases. These kids would give us every last bit of the nothing they had, as our comfort was their happiness. I will never forget the time when eight-year-old Rabindra gave me the little drinking

water he had saved so that I may wash my face in the morning when there was a water outage. Six-year-old Mim washed the bathroom we shared with seven boys every morning before we stepped in—I hadn't picked up a scrub brush for the first time until my junior year of college. This experience taught me that every little thing you receive in life is something to be thankful for, and that it is possible to have fun and be happy without twenty pairs of shoes, overly expensive meals, and 1k followers on Instagram.



My summer of service is an experience I know I could never possibly forget. I think about the children I met whenever I see children now, hum the tunes of the songs I learned subconsciously, and speak the little Nepali I know with Samantha and Alexa whenever I get the chance. More importantly, though, I have learned to appreciate everything so much more than I did before. I always knew how privileged I was for my education, food, and shelter, but things I did not realize I was privileged to have, such as two healthy, loving parents, I now do. For showing me that giving, accepting, and loving unconditionally give the greatest joys in life, I will always be grateful towards the students at Sri Shitala Secondary school, the children at Kopila Children's Home, and my forever family in the little city of Kathmandu, Nepal.