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College was an incredible experience for me. At Belmont I not only earned my degree but I learned about myself and the person I wanted to be when I graduated. Graduation was an open door, an opportunity to do whatever I wanted. One night I made a list of all the options I felt were available to me. My list included things like; grad school, peace core and get a job. I figured it was now or never so I leaned towards the peace core option. To be clear, 'peace core' really just stands for 'any sort of philanthropic endeavor that I wouldn't normally be able to participate in.'

I distinctly remember having a conversation with my mom where I told her that I didn't want to look back on my life and be one of those people that never took risks or had a great adventure. Fast forward past figuring out what organization I wanted, convincing my dad, raising money and saying good-bye, I was on my way to teach English in the Dominican Republic.

This may sound naïve but, I really thought that I had a handle on what to expect when I was going to the Dominican Republic. Turns out, I had no idea and I really did step into the biggest adventure of my life. I got off the plane and headed to my new home: Torre Alta, Calle Dos, Numero Cuatro. We went home and Liz, my Dominican mom and founder of the organization I was working with, Dove Missions, immediately took me to the beach. There was something about being there, on the beach that made everything feel so exciting.

It was my understanding that I would be teaching English and doing some online media work for the organization. My first day with the kids was overwhelming. There was a teacher at the center that happened to be my age and spoke really great English. She was my patient liaison between the curious 5-12 year olds and the new white volunteer. Her name is Marlenis and my trip wouldn't have been the same without her. As is the case with forging any new relationships, it the kids awhile to open up to me and for me to open up to them. Using my mediocre, at best, Spanish was mortifying to me so when I finally started having conversations with the students and other teachers it felt like a miracle.

On Mondays and Wednesdays I would teach English for an hour. My first lessons were terrible. I really had no idea what I was doing. The kids had also had a few different teachers throughout the summer, so figuring out what they knew and assessing how to push forward was a bigger undertaking than I expected. Just like everything else though, we fell into a rhythm. One of the best days I had teaching was when we came up with a game where the students described something in Spanish and I would tell them the word in English. Tuesdays and Thursdays I would help the other teachers in class, Tuesday was girls day and Thursday was boys. Saturday was our biggest day when all the kids would be at the club. The routine of it was actually really great. The children began to expect me and know that I would come. If there was a day that English was canceled I would never hear the end of it. Unlike any other mission experience I had before, this became my community.

Puerto Plata really became my home. I had work to do, a home to stay at and friends. It was really incredible. In October we took a trip to Haiti and it became even clearer how comfortable I felt in

the Dominican Republic. The journey to Haiti from the DR is difficult. Geographically the two countries share the island of Hispaniola, but there couldn't be two more different places. To travel to the Haitian border you have to take Gua Guas. Gua Guas are really rickety busses that transport people the same way, but where two people should be sitting there are always four. On the island of Hispaniola there is no such thing as personal space. Once you make it to the border you walk across a bridge and are in Haiti. Haitian guards stop you and ask for your passport. They hold machine guns and look at you with an unaffected stare. You never quite know what a guard in either country will ask of you, it's very jarring. We continued our journey into Haiti in a similar fashion until we reached Our Lady of Perpetual Help in Cap Haitian.

Meeting the priest, Father Andre, that started and runs the orphanage there was incredible. Hearing his life story and truly getting to experience and be a part of the fruits of his faith was an unimaginable gift. During my time in Haiti we were able to provide the orphanage with supplies they needed. I was able to play with and spend time with the precious and well cared for children. There were also opportunities to go out into the city and truly absorb all that Haiti is. Let me just say, 'all that Haiti is' is a lot to take in. When we left Haiti and made our way back to Puerto Plata the same way we had gone it was a great sigh of relief just to walk into our house.

If I had to summarize my time in the Dominican Republic and in Haiti I would say it was the greatest adventure of my life. The gratitude I feel for Lumos and the people that helped me go there and experience everything to the fullest cannot be measured. However, it was also the scariest experience of my life. There were moments I had to look at my fear, whether it was over speaking the language or travel, and decide if I was going to let it dictate how I lived while I was there. Everything is so new and intimidating, you have no choice but to decide and try and tackle it or not. When I did decide to go for it, and it didn't always turn out great, I knew that God was there with me, pushing me and helping me to live the story of my life. I left with another family and a deep connection to an organization I don't see going away any time soon.

Now I am working with Dove to produce a Christmas CD of our kids in the DR and Haiti singing songs and playing instruments. We are creating an album adding songs from local Nashville artists. I feel so honored to be working on this project. The kids love music and it such a release for them. I am excited to be working on this and what the music program we are developing there will look like in the future.