

A photograph of three women standing on a grassy hill overlooking a densely populated town in Colombia. The town is built on a hillside, with many small, colorful buildings. In the background, there are rolling green hills and mountains under a blue sky with scattered white clouds. The text 'The Lumos Award: Transforming Communities in Colombia' is overlaid on the top half of the image.

The Lumos Award: Transforming Communities in Colombia

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Hillary Merwin

Of all the places in the world...

The majority of people asked me—upon learning that I would be living abroad for six months—“Why Colombia?” It’s a country burdened under the weight of a violent past and turbulent present, one that carries certain stereotypes whenever it’s brought up in conversation. Yet looking beneath the minority groups that have consistently painted Colombia with a bad name lay a rich culture and a strong people, proud of their homeland. It’s a place hurting from its history but with people eager to put the pieces back together.

But one only discovers this by going there. So through a set of circumstances, I traveled to Colombia for the first time in 2011 through a mission trip. My group partnered with a church and nonprofit whose mission is to transform broken communities, one neighborhood at a time. So we spent a week putting on a Vacation Bible School for a tiny town tucked away in the Andes Mountains called Pacho. While the foundation had already established a presence in Bogotá, this was their first major event in Pacho. I was able to see the importance of building relationships and even how reaching out to children first can allow you to connect with parents later on, all in the efforts of unifying a community. It was a week full of fun and games, beautiful new friendships and a revelation that would change the course of my life. I realized I wanted to learn Spanish and one day return to this beautiful country and continue work with the foundation.

Planning the return

With two years left at Belmont, I added a Spanish major to my studies in English and started planning my return. At the end of my senior year, I learned about the Lumos Award and its purpose to send students on life-changing adventures of service abroad. I was in. My proposal was easy because I believed so fully in the mission of the foundation as I had seen it at work with my own eyes. Graciously funded by the Lumos Travel Foundation, I set off on a six-month journey to learn more about community development, improve my Spanish and—little did I know—be welcomed into an amazing new family.

Fundación Comunidad Viva

Started just three years ago by Colombian natives Jorge and Ginny Enciso, Fundación Comunidad Viva already has an incredible presence in Bogotá and is expanding to different neighborhoods in the city and even growing beyond the capital. While the foundation has many programs, from a second-hand store to crafting workshops for women, the three main areas of focus are:



1. **SuperVacas:** This is the trademarked name of the Vacation Bible School program created by the foundation. Every single week of SuperVacas the foundation puts on is up to the team to create, down to the hundreds of cut up magazines pieces for a desert collage decoration to designing a cardboard boat craft for 100 kids. And during my six-month stay, we put on four different weeks! But above all, these weeks are amazing opportunities to get to know kids and families in the community and often the first step in building meaningful relationships.



2. **Programa de Ayuda Extraescolar (PAE):** This is an after-school tutoring program for kids in the northern Bogotá neighborhood of Prado Veraniego. This is also a site for one of our Vacation Bible Schools so it's a great way to get kids involved in both programs! They come twice a week for reading, crafts and homework help with volunteers from the community.

3. **La Cueva:** This word meaning, "the cave" is the name of the orphanage that the foundation started for orphans who turn 18 and are essentially kicked out of the state-run system. Jorge and Ginny's old apartment is now used as a transitional home for three guys who are working and studying hard to get through college. Some of them have even received scholarships to study and are thriving in this independent living situation.

Hopes and expectations

Having spent my last two years at Belmont studying Spanish and getting involved in the nonprofit and Hispanic communities teaching ESL and organizing a language exchange program, I was ready to put those skills to work. Fundación Comunidad Viva would give me the unique experiences of working with a young nonprofit and seeing what it takes to develop programs and respond to the needs of a community. I would also have the opportunity to work in downtown Bogotá as the Encisos began to implement the same strategies of the to a new community in the center of the city. Also having spent time with the Encisos, I knew they would entrust me with great responsibilities to help the foundation carry out its mission: to transform communities one neighborhood at a time.

The arrival

Upon arriving in Bogotá, I had one day to adjust to the altitude, culture shock (which was surprisingly not too bad) and my new living situation before hopping onto a noisy, cramped bus on a two-hour winding trek through the Andes Mountains. Stepping off the bus in Pacho (the tiny mountain town where my whole journey had



started two years prior) I immediately spied familiar faces and was met with warm hugs from kids I had played with two years ago. What a beautiful welcome.

The entire week proved to be a snapshot of what the rest of my time in Colombia would look like. Lots of kids, running around, thinking up creative ideas on the spot for games, lessons, or crafts, building relationships with families and growing closer to the incredible team from Bogotá. SuperVacas was the perfect way to jumpstart my journey. And there was no slowing down.

Meeting the need

An amazing part of Fundación Comunidad Viva is that they not only try to be proactive in predicting needs and creating programs to fulfill those needs, but they also respond to unexpected situations that weren't originally part of the plan. So when a family close to the foundation found out their daughter had a brain tumor, the foundation jumped in to help. What resulted was an incredible look at how a nonprofit can grow through simply investing in relationships.

I was blessed to be able to serve the family as essentially a caregiver for one month: cooking meals and watching the kids while the parents were at the hospital. But just getting to know the family and building trust with the neighbors opened doors to connect with an afterschool program called Ciudad Corazón (Heart City) the mother had already created for the neighborhood kids. By teaming up our resources to partner with Ciudad Corazón, we were able to build relationships with the children and parents of this community and begin to lay the foundation for future programs in this new neighborhood.

Down to business

After a somewhat tumultuous first two months in Bogotá, I was able settle into more of a routine—one that allowed me to participate in every aspect of the foundation on a weekly basis!



Tuesdays and Thursday we as a team worked on planning for the Vacation Bible Schools and in the afternoon led the PAE tutoring program. It was an amazing opportunity to get

to see the same faces of neighborhood kids every week. We would have a blast playing games, working on homework, reading, and making crafts (I now have an endless list of children's crafts if I ever need ideas in the future).

Mondays and Wednesdays I would meet with neighborhood girls to just talk about life. I had about four girls I would meet with regularly. Many of them came from rough pasts or unstable homes and just having a consistent source of support meant so much to them. It was so encouraging to see them connecting with the foundation and becoming active volunteers in the programs by the time I was ready to come home!



Throughout the week I would also do individual tutoring sessions. Halfway through my trip, I moved into La Cueva (the transition home for orphans) and lived with the guys and two house moms. This was a great opportunity to get to tutor the two boys who were struggling with English in the university and encourage them to get more connected as volunteers in the foundation. One of them actually wound up traveling to Pacho with us to help with Vacation Bible School!

Weekends were anything but restful. Fridays and Sundays were devoted to planning the new nonprofit downtown and essentially just getting to know the community. We were extremely intentional with these efforts, taking walks through the main downtown areas, talking to people about needs they saw in their community and even bringing some strangers back with us for our Friday and Sunday night gatherings. These were times we set aside to create safe places for those who usually spent these evenings in more dangerous and less edifying activities. Instead, we used these gatherings to serve the community (making sandwiches and hot tea to pass out to homeless neighbors or holding a forum to discuss farmer's rights issues—a heated topic in Colombia). Whatever we did, we made sure it was focused on getting to know our neighbors and serving the city. By the time I was ready to leave, we had built a solid group of people who were intent on seeing their neighborhood transformed.

Taking matters into my own hands

One of the most unexpected yet rewarding experiences during my time serving in Colombia was an opportunity I had to put into practice everything I had been learning about nonprofit and community development work.

Coming into this service experience, I knew the Encisos would give me responsibilities that I might not get in another organization. They already knew me and my abilities and trusted me with both my input and talents. So when we saw a need begin to grow in Pacho amongst the youth, Jorge asked me to be in charge of seeing to it. While our Vacation Bible Schools were a great outreach for the kids, Pacho has a booming population of teens. And in the nature of any small town, many of them have nothing to do on the weekends but things that could get them into trouble.

So I started making the winding two-hour drive to Pacho every Saturday to spend the day in the town square getting to know the teens that walked by. A few weeks later I was meeting regularly every Saturday with a group of about eight of them for an English class in the afternoon and a movie club at night. We became a tight knit group and often stayed after class just talking about life. It was such a great feeling to know I could be a mentor for these kids.



It was also the perfect way for me sense a need in this community and be given the task and responsibility to respond to it. And I met some pretty amazing teenagers along the way.

Snapshots of community

Here are some special snapshots I have of the beauty of community I witnessed during my time in Colombia:

- After a week of SuperVacas in a northern neighborhood of Bogotá, we decided to share a meal with the community. After teaching the kids about serving others, we asked them to

bring ingredients for a *sancocho* (a typical Colombia soup) that we would prepare the next day. We cooked the meal and set up tables outside so when the parents arrived to pick up their kids, they could stay and eat. The kids got to continue playing as the parents sat at tables getting to know one another. Even some curious neighbors stopped by to grab a bowl of delicious *sancocho*!

- After living in La Cueva for a few months, we had become like a family. So when it came to be Thanksgiving, I convinced everyone to celebrate this American holiday with a traditional meal. After paying incredibly too

much for an imported turkey and making a pumpkin pie from scratch, all sat around the table and shared we were thankful for. One of the boys teared up when he let me know that I been like a sister to him after he had a rough start getting adjusted to life in



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house. Later that night he posted a photo on Facebook of all of us sitting around the table that said “celebrating Thanksgiving with my family.” He also happened to be one of the guys who came to Pacho with us in December.

- For one of our Friday night gatherings we invited everyone we’d ever come into contact with to come hang out in the park in downtown Bogotá. We brought things to make sandwiches, something hot to drink, and an assortment of random musical instruments. We spent the night making music, telling stories and sharing a meal. This definitely felt like a turning point in our efforts to get to know the downtown community of Bogotá.

The take-away

While I entered this adventure knowing it would be an incredible learning experience, I had no idea that I would fall in love with this country and its people. By being so warmly accepted into this

culture, I was able to flourish and take risks—which meant getting to know so many people, affecting their lives, and in turn being influenced by them.

So much of community development is based in relationships and seeking them out. In just six months, I was able to see neighbors come together at impromptu community block parties, share a meal with strangers at our Vacation Bible School party for parents and even starting my own group for teens. I was able to see how hope truly lies with children. Sometimes the only way to start piecing a community back together is starting with the kids. I witnessed how even the lives of volunteers helping out with the programs can be changed. Working with the foundation gave them a purpose and a community. I felt this same sense of purpose and discovered that some broken pieces within myself found healing through my time in Colombia.

Thanks to the Lumos Foundation, I was able to take this journey—one that has forever changed my life and given me a new desire to see communities changed wherever I may find myself in the world.