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With a generous award from the Lumos Foundation, I travelled to Rio de Janeiro, Brazil for six months to work with the local organization JIVE (Jacarandá International Volunteering Experience) Brazil as a volunteer in their community development program. JIVE works in the favelas, or slums, throughout Rio, sending an international community of volunteers to teach English, work in childcare, help rebuild and renovate communities, coach futbol and surfing, and work in many other projects in an effort to support, promote, and cultivate strong communities. My work abroad centered in the favela known as Sao Cristovao, more specifically in the neighborhood Barrio do Vasco, where I volunteered as both an art teacher and an aid to a local artist. Primarily, my work focused on maintaining and implementing arts education programs in communities that have limited access to them, creating community arts projects, and supporting local art. In this sense, my work with JIVE and their local partners, allowed me to exercise art as a vehicle that fosters social opportunity, justice, and change in some of the most marginalized communities of Rio de Janeiro.

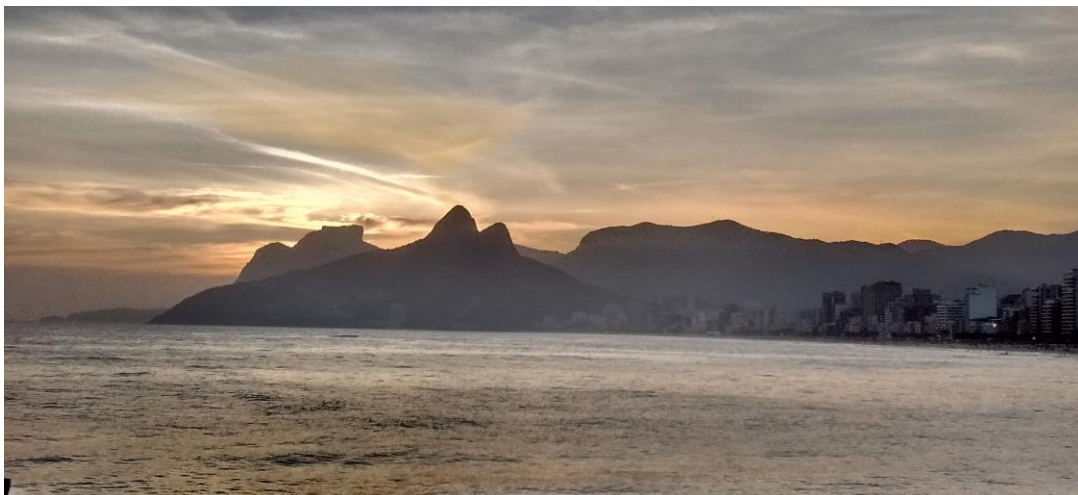
My time in Rio allowed me to put my two greatest passions, social justice and the arts, to work in an intercultural dialogue. The arts are intrinsically connected to the human experience and are often used as a sort of social dialogue that brings attention to and provides relief from many social ills. The culture of Rio is largely shaped by its arts, whether it be street graffiti, samba music and dance, or Carnival. By exploring the way the culture of Rio de Janeiro, and even larger Brazil, is connected and related to the art it makes, we can develop an important understanding of how art can serve as a universal language that can break down social barriers, foster communal and intercultural

connections, and ultimately support a more sustainable way of life for both individuals and communities, despite the limitations of language.



ABOUT RIO: FAVELAS

There is a reason Cariocas, or Rio de Janeiro natives, refer to their home city as “Cidade Maravilhosa.” It is hard to ignore the natural beauty and vibrant Brazilian culture that makes Rio inherently marvelous. Despite the many beautiful sights, sounds, and tastes that Rio has to offer, it is not without its own set of social problems. As one of the world’s largest developing countries, Brazil is characterized by extreme social and economic inequality. In fact, Brazil, and certainly Rio, seems as though it is made up entirely of juxtapositions.



Rio de Janeiro is largely a tourist city. One might fawn over the miles of white sand and crystal blue water beaches that stretch along the coast, or imagine the amazing site seeing at one of the world's seven wonders, Christ the Redeemer. Tourists, and even Brazilians, indulge the world of caipirinhas, coconuts, and Brazilian churrasco. While all of these things are certainly part of Rio's culture, there is another sect of Cariocas and their culture that is largely ignored- here I am addressing the social, political, and physical landscape of what Caricoas and Brazilians alike refer to a comunidades, or favelas.

As I've stated previously, Rio de Janeiro is full of juxtapositions, social or otherwise. Perhaps one of the juxtapositions that characterize Rio, and other places in Brazil, the most is the extreme wealth and inequality gap between the rich and the poor, specifically regarding the thousands of Cariocas that live in favelas across Rio. The favelas dot the skyline of Rio like stars in the sky. They are scattered throughout the expansive city, even at the ends of those white sand beaches. There are separate pockets rising up the hillsides in every direction, many overlapping, and even more frequent as the high-rise apartment buildings in the main city center.

Favelas are home to nearly 1.4 million people, almost a quarter of Rio's 6.4 million population. Despite the geographical proximity to the main city center, even at times blending in, favelas are marked by extreme poverty. This history, and the projected future of the communities, is the result of a corrupt social structure in Rio. In the past, the local, state, and federal governments have tried to prevent the favelas from growing any larger. However, rather than fostering social programs that attempt to alleviate poverty and support the community, the government instead denied favelas access to basic human resources-such as clean water and electricity. As such, the modern image of the favela has become one characterized by unsanitary living conditions and complete marginalization from other areas in Rio. This denial of resources stems into many other social institutions as well, as documented by the lack of economic and educational opportunities in the favelas, and furthermore the flocking of tourists to favelas to experience "favela tours" with a callow eagerness that only thickens the social veil and privilege of those that live on the other side. Consequently, people living in the favelas are often forced to create their own sense of social security. In part, social isolation in the favela has fostered the rise of a social and economic structure that is dependent on a drug industry run by local cartels.

What's important to remember here though is that this particular image ignores the strong sense of community, resourcefulness, and optimism that exists among the members of many favelas. While violence and poverty, as well as police brutality and corruption, is very alive and active in and around the favelas, you will find so much more among the hearts and minds of the people who have, more often than not, lived there their entire lives. The people that live in the favelas, and furthermore the large majority of informed, socially aware Cariocas are extremely attentive to their social world. More than one time I listened to stories about the Rio local government caring more about tourists and the rich than the vast social issues that the majority of Cariocas are facing, and

yet still, Cariocas refuse to be inactive in their communities. It doesn't take much to look beyond the traditional image of Rio and see what exists on the other side. In the same vein, one only has to sit and listen to the stories of people and observe and participate in the daily routine of a community member to understand it doesn't take much to break down the traditional image of the comunidades and see what really exists there.



PROGRAM STRUCTURE AND MY WORK:

For my own volunteer work in Rio de Janeiro, I spent six months working in the favela Barrio do Vasco. Barrio do Vasco is a neighborhood inside the larger favela Sao Cristovao, and it inherits its title from the widely popular Brazilian futbol club of the same name that is located in the area. While Vasco is one of the smaller comunidades in Rio, over 15,000 people call it home. While volunteering in this community, I worked simultaneously on two projects focused in the arts.

In the first project, I volunteered as an aid to an organization known as Retalhos Cariocas, which literally translates to "Patchwork Cariocas" (Cariocas literally meaning natives of Rio de Janeiro). Retalhos Cariocas works with recycled, found, and donated materials to make pieces of art and design. The artist Silvinha Oliveira and her mother, lovingly referred to as Fafa, started Retalhos Cariocas as an artistic initiative to share their artistic and creative knowledge throughout the community of Vasco. Throughout my work, I had the opportunity to work with Retalhos Cariocas on several of their major projects. On one occasion myself and several other volunteers were able to work at the "Circuito Modacarioca" artistic exhibition where fashion designers, jewelry makes, painters, brewers, and artisans gathered to both share and workshop their artistic knowledge with the surrounding community. Closer to Christmas, Retalhos Cariocas was invited by one the biggest fashion retailers in Rio to

participate in an art showcase at the Galeao International Airport. With a little less than a week until the deadline, we worked to create an original Christmas tree design that embodied the style of her work. At the end of the week, we were at the airport, assembling a multifaceted tree that incorporated designs and pieces that I made on my very first day working with Retalhos Cariocas.



There is something extremely extraordinary about Retalhos Cariocas and the work they do. The work there is concerned with a community. Their work is about a “we.” It is about what a community can accomplish when they share their knowledge. It welcomes all to come and participate. Most importantly, the work of Retalhos Cariocas demonstrates how art making can transform the community in which it is born. Being a part of this sort of creative process means constant change and constant opportunity to learn from my work, my environment, and the surrounding community. This is an opportunity that I am not only honored and proud to have been a part of, but also privileged to have gained a new learning and creative perspective.



In addition to my work with Retalhos Cariocas, I also volunteered as an art teacher at the local community center for children, Emarca. Here I worked with four different age groups of children, ranging from four to thirteen, exploring artistic expression through visual art, crafts, music, dance, and culture.



At the end of each class and each lesson I found myself gaining even more clarity and fulfillment than I thought was possible. It was not always easy to communicate and connect with the children I worked with. Never mind the

language barrier, we worked to create and execute productive lessons. Though each day presented a unique opportunity, I found more often than not that, relying on the smiles on their faces, that the children truly enjoyed whatever art activity was happening that day. I have always found that artistic expression, of any sort, has allowed me to discover so much about my own potential and myself. What's more is that some of the most valuable connections I have made in life have been through art. So to be able to share what is closest to my heart with people who have very limited access to artistic resources and communities leaves me with not only extreme gratitude, but also excitement about seeing what art means and could mean for them. Not every day was a success, but it was just as much as a learning experience for me as it was for the Emarca children.



Working at Emarca gave me an important insight into the lives of children living in Barrio do Vasco. Despite the fact that I never saw the children in their homes, or at their schools, and rarely with their parents, I constantly heard new stories from my local program directors at the center about the lives of these children. During the course of my program, I began to realize how interconnected the social issues in Rio are. While there are so many programs, including futbol, English, and art classes, that Emarca is doing to provide an encouraging environment for their students, it is hard to reconcile that, because of government funding, social structure, poverty, lack of access to resources, and a myriad of other issues, these children will not receive the same opportunities that children outside of the favelas have. Even with as much insight as I gained, as close as I became to many of the children, as much time as I spent there, I will never understand their realities. Their worlds will remain incomprehensible to me. What is important to remember is that social change does not happen all at once- it happens one step at a time. These kids are so much more than their outbursts. They are so much more than poverty, poor education, and a lack of resources. They are present, and they are hungry to love and learn. They deserve not to be looked over, and they deserve a relentless effort.



PERSONAL REFLECTIONS:



Before I left for Brazil, I struggled to imagine what my time there would look like. I held on to doubt that my dreams were about to become my reality, and I tried to package my entire time in Brazil into a singular box. Despite my worry, I resolved that not knowing what was ahead would not only be the adventure of lifetime, but also the best way to approach the learning experience ahead. I embraced my own discomfort and uncertainty about the multitude of experiences that were ahead of me, and I realized that the beautiful thing about traveling abroad is that there is no such thing as a singular story or experience. By taking advantage of the unknown, I've allowed myself to let go, but also become more connected. Where I normally struggle to open up, to expose myself and be vulnerable, to avoid pre-meditation on everything I do, I instead got comfortable with the unknown. That change in attitude afforded me several opportunities, including the opportunity to take initiative and experiment with trial and error. Now, there is no way that one single perception of myself or experience I had in Brazil would account, suffice, or accurately explain the thousands of meaningful experiences I had there.

Traveling abroad for an extended period of time has its pros and cons. It can be absolutely confusing at times, and it most certainly did not make all of my problems disappear. Traveling to Brazil raised my own self-doubt and worry, but it also taught me to face and deal with those personal issues too. What it crucial to remember is that traveling gives you time to find a new ground and perspective. Rio took me in, gave me a home, helped me to open up to new relationships with others, with myself, and with the world around me that had seemed so distant before. It showed me the stark, up close and personal realities of the social and economic turmoil that I studied in a classroom. It showed me a lifestyle and a culture that actively combats its own social flaws and its distorted

world image. Perhaps most importantly, Rio invited me in to be a part of it all. It is in that experience that I made a home in Rio. I became a part of a family with my fellow volunteers. I became a sister and a friend to the children I worked with at Emarca and a colleague to the artist of Retalhos Cariocas. I became more of a companion and support to myself. Its hard to succinctly sum up all of my experiences in Rio, even after rereading all my journal entries and blogs, looking through pictures, and revisiting memories with my new and dear friends. But what I can tell say is that Rio became my home and my life, and upon heading to the airport to catch a plane (or many) back to Nashville, I wasn't sure if I was leaving home or heading to it.



There are so many questions I am left with after my time in Brazil, and I simultaneously have too many answers to these questions and none at all. My time in Rio lead me in so many directions, gave me so many new perspectives, and guided me through a sort of self-actualizing pilgrimage. That being said, it's really hard for me to wrap up six months in Rio into one succinct statement that feels both authentic and whole. But what is more is that this is absolutely okay. I don't necessarily think I need to have all the answers now, and furthermore I think part of this whole journey is allowing myself the time to breathe it in, let it simmer, and take it as it comes. I may have too many or not enough answers right now, but I am comforted that what I felt, what I experienced, what I lived for six months is real and genuine.

Right now I don't have all the answers, and most days I feel like I have none at all. For now I can tell you this: Rio does not and will not live in my past. It is something I take and will take with me everyday. Its so much more than just something I will remember for the rest of my life. My time in Rio lives on inside of me. My kids' smiles, my friends' laughter, and my heart's love and excitement for the Cidade Maravilhosa will continue to grow, even if I'm not physically there. Most importantly, thanks to the Lumos Travel Award Program, Rio made a massive impact on my life and where I will take my life in the future.

