

Lumos Final Report

I had an incredible experience living in Nicaragua and working with Manna Project International. I truly believe it was the most definitive experience of my life so far. During my time with Manna, I learned so much about Nicaraguan history and culture, the day-to-day workings of nonprofits, how to cope with living in a house with 25 other people while in a developing nation, and, of course, a lot of Spanish. I came back to America a different person, and I believe I am better for it.

I spent four months preparing to go to Nicaragua. I read up on the history of US-Nicaraguan relationships, I researched the pros and cons of foreign NGOs, and I spent hours studying Spanish. All of that meant I was slightly less shocked than I could have been once I arrived. Nothing can really prepare you for jumping straight into working and living in a foreign country. I was surprised when I arrived at the house and realized we would have no air conditioning. I was surprised by the lack of trash disposal in Managua and the prevalence of mosquito born diseases such as Dengue fever and Chikungunya. I knew going in that I would see these things, but I was still taken aback some days.



Figure 1 The view from our roof

After a week I had more or less settled in. The heat wasn't as suffocating and I had learned to sleep with bug spray on. My Spanish was still limited but every day I learned so many words. I was challenged in every way – physically, emotionally, and mentally. I enjoyed rising to the challenges and testing my limits. I didn't always excel, I had many conversations with community members that were full of misunderstandings and repeats of “más despacio por favor,” but I tried. Everyday I felt that I had learned so much. It was hard, but it was rewarding work.

One of my favorite memories from my time in Nicaragua was the time I spent with Lorena, one of the community members who is deeply involved with Manna Project. I did a homestay with her and loved getting to talk late into the night about the differences between our lives, the Manna programs, and learning about her life. She invited me to come back later in the week to practice some Spanish with her. I went with another intern and we spent the afternoon reading Spanish children's books and giggling over our American accents. A man stopped by the house while we were there selling a homemade candy. Lorena didn't even hesitate in buying some for us to try. It was such a simple gesture, but it was so kind of her. Her generosity will always stay in my memory and serves as a reminder to me that an open heart can cross all language and cultural boundaries.



Figure 2 Lorena and me

I made so many friends and met so many people during my trip. Some of the community members I became closest with were in my English 4 class. We picked up a lot of our students in our micro van on the way to class. The time spent in the car together was a great way to build connections. During those car trips I learned just how universal Taylor Swift is and how many slang words our students had already picked up. One car ride in particular sticks out in my mind. We picked up a woman named Maria who was in our class but had been absent for nearly a month. I barely recognized her, but she remembered me and struck up a conversation. She told me that she had been absent because her boyfriend had been killed in a car accident and she had been taking time to process her grief. I gave her my condolences and she took my hand and thanked me. It was such a powerful moment of connection and something I had never experienced with a near stranger before. After that conversation, she and I became friends and always talked before and after class.



Figure 3 Lucas, Maria, and me

The memories that stick out the most in my mind are those that cemented the friendships I made. I saw so many beautiful things while I was in Nicaragua, but none were more beautiful than the people I met. In my past travel experiences I was much more focused on the sites I was seeing and the cool pictures I was taking. With this trip, I was able to really immerse myself in the culture and make relationships with the community. I learned so much more about life in Nicaragua because of the new people I talked with. In our house, we made a point to have conversations about Nicaraguan politics and history in order for everyone to learn more. Immersion was really stressed with Manna and it resulted in amazing cultural understanding. Travel experiences like that are so rare and I am so grateful that I was able to experience one.

I'm sure everyone writes this in his or her final report, but once I returned to the States I had a completely different outlook on my culture and my life. Arriving in Houston felt like another planet, with all of the wide highways and brand new cars. I missed the fruit stands on the side of the road and the capos scuttling up and down our

neighborhood. Life here is so fast paced, and now that I've started school and a new job I find myself forgetting what it was like to live in Nicaragua. I have to remind myself that there are other ways to live life and that material things, work, and study are only small parts of life. While I saw the really difficult parts of life in Nicaragua, I also saw the beauty of the culture and land. The memories I have of my time there will always stay with me as a reminder of the incredible diversity and magnificence of our planet and its people.



Figure 4 The view from the top of a hill near our house. Lake Managua is in the distance.