

Final Lumos Report: Erin Sanislo

My time in Ecuador was filled with highs, lows, and lots of unknowns. I created a Lumos project focused around developing and enhancing programming at a community center outside of Quito while advancing literacy. I ran community programs by myself, lived as one of the only Americans in a remote valley, and navigated daily life in Spanish. I received positive praise from community members, formed relationships with children, parents, and students my own age, and helped revamp five community center programs at the Manna Project: reading hour, kids cooking, physical activity, and kids and adult English. Although I originally planned to serve in Ecuador until August, I returned to the United States early for safety reasons.



Reading hour



My cooking class

One of the greatest life lessons I have learned from my Lumos experience is that life is not always what you expect. You can research and vet an organization in detail, but have a completely different experience on the ground in a foreign country. As open-minded travelers, we have the responsibility to adapt as much as we can to fit into the organizational culture and culture of the country we are serving in. However, we also hold responsibilities to ourselves and our loved ones to stay safe and know how to assess risks. For my particular Lumos award, the best decision for me was to change the duration of my service in order to prioritize my well-being.

Here is a run-down of the positives and the negatives I experienced in Ecuador:

Positives:

- I increased the attendance of the community center's programs and formed a group of kids who became regulars of its weekly programs.
- I stayed with an Ecuadorian host family for my first week and maintained a strong relationship with them throughout my time in Ecuador (and will continue to do so in the future).
- Over 85% of my English students passed the English levels I taught and advanced to the next level.
- I used my Spanish skills to help support the Manna Project community center by providing information to parents and connecting with non-English speaking kids during programs.
- I developed a new literacy program that was included in the community center's weekly schedule and changed some kids' attitudes about reading.
- I developed new policies at community center.
 - Ie. Providing water to all children, no-screen policy during programming times
- I discovered my passion for sharing my love of languages through teaching.



Physical activity hour, a favorite on the weekly schedule

Negatives:

- The organization I worked with, Manna Project International, seems to have better management at its Nicaragua site than at its Ecuador site. Unfortunately, the management was extremely hands-off, disconnected, and dismissive of safety concerns. For future Lumos travelers, I would not recommend working with this organization.
- During my time in Ecuador, I had money and my iPhone robbed. Although petty crime is common in developing countries and there are many underlying reasons for it, the frequency of its occurrence in the specific location I lived in and the threats with weapons or physical force that accompanied it were very unsettling.
- Safety concerns: Part of the Manna Project's mission is to live in a communal house. Unfortunately, the house was extremely poorly maintained and presented safety risks from gas leaks, exposed electrical installations, venomous insect infestations, and a house robbery. The attention that was attracted from four American girls living alone in the house also was difficult since some people assumed we were rich and easy to steal from.

Although it was difficult to come home early, I am very thankful for the opportunity to serve abroad on a Lumos award. My Lumos service provided me the skills of teaching and classroom management, translation, and community engagement. The experience in Ecuador will make me a better, globally-minded Spanish teacher in the future. I hope to instill the desire in others to use their language skills to serve communities abroad and connect to other cultures. I also hope to include aspects of South American cultures including the Ecuadorian culture and service learning into my teaching pedagogy.



Instructing English to 32 Ecuadorians

My Lumos trip taught me lessons that might be useful for future Lumos travelers. I think that travelers should budget for contingencies and inquire into how their sponsoring organizations allocate the program fees to different expenses. During my own experience, a disproportionately low amount of my organization's fee was spent on providing food and housing necessities, so I often paid out of pocket for extra expenses. Another piece of advice is for travelers to interview their sponsoring organizations. In my case, I had to interview with the non-profit to be offered a Program Director position. However, I should have interviewed the organization in return! Starting a new position is always a two-way street. If I could re-do my experience, I would ask the organization next time about the allocation of funds and resources, number of volunteers actually on-site, and dependence and level of need. With my particular organization, the goals of the mission statement were very different than the realities of the organization's work on-site. In addition, the organization's shorthandedness at the time meant I was often running the entire community center watching over 25 kids sometimes by myself! Make sure the organization is not so understaffed that your presence or absence makes such a large impact. Finally, I'd advise future travelers to pick a country where they have some prior connections. It was difficult for me to run into problems with my organization and the safety of my country when I was miles away from people I knew and trusted to help me.

Although I would choose a different sponsoring organization next time, I am very grateful to Lumos and Belmont University for the opportunity and their support throughout my Lumos experience. I gained career purpose, direct international work experience, foreign language practice, and a connection to a country across the world where I feel that I positively influenced a community center that hundreds of Ecuadorians utilize. Although I ultimately had to leave the country before I had planned, I still keep in touch with several Ecuadorian friends and community members today who value the relationships I formed with them in the short time I spent in Ecuador. I look forward to sharing more about my experience and tips for future Lumos travelers during my convocation at Belmont University this fall.



My host family