

It's never fun to be denied. Whenever we put ourselves out there, there's always a chance that we could be denied. It seems a bit silly that we do this but we do. I did this in 2016, shooting my shot and missing. Denied. Some of us are even sillier and put ourselves out there again. What makes us do that? It's probably a mix of a lot of things. For me, it was a clear passion the moment I learned about New Hope Girls. It made that Lumos denial smaller and smaller as I listened to the New Hope story. It was time to apply again.

La Vega, Dominican Republic. A small town that has beautiful views and dark secrets. Light beckons through on a little street just past La Sirena supermercado. A property that opens to a new hope, a new hope for life, a new hope for change, a new hope for girls. New Hope Girls. A year prior, I stepped on the property for the first time through a study abroad experience. We were really studying the social enterprise of the women's workshop but I felt connected to the safe house for girls. I wasn't sure why but it felt right.



Hours of applying, a nerve-racking interview, and a year later, I stepped on the property behind the supermercado again. The property that serves girls from difficult and dark places. I stepped in with the goal of teaching the girls in transitional care that have just arrived at the safe house. With my degree in elementary education, it made sense, I would teach these girls Spanish, Math, English, and Science since they are unable to go to the local school. It made sense to me. The plan was ready for action and I was as ready as I could be! A wide eyed right out of college girl thinking the plan would go smoothly. Oh how I was wrong.



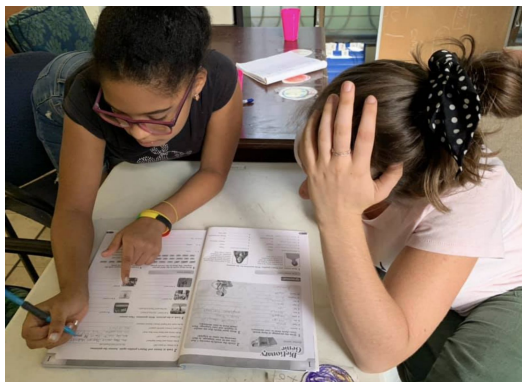
There are many things that an average college graduate learns the year post-grad. 'Wide-eyed, thinking she can change the world, feeling prepared' Jess learned more than she can count. Hard truths were probably the one that stung each time. Hard truths outside my small world. These hard truths resulting in crying over a bucket of socks before giving several pairs to an incoming girl with a story I wasn't ready to hear. These hard truths resulting in a sense of loss as we take two steps forward and three steps back. These hard truths of a 4 year old teaching me more about myself and finding my core before I could.



Control. I want it, I need it, I have to have it. Oh, pero, chica! No es asi. One of my hardest truths I learned was to give control away. Away to the process, away to the caretaker, away to time, away to God. Weeks without water, weeks without power, weeks without a day of peaceful learning, weeks without something feeling like it was moving forward. But once again, no es asi. Each moment of waiting, each moment of letting go was a step forward for us all. The girls pushed me to give my control over as they started to trust themselves, trust their new friends and sisters and as they began to trust me. The girls pushed me to see their healing in a not so obvious way. The girls pushed me.



Although my five to seven girls were not able to go to a local school in the community like the other girls in the house. We were able to provide them a safe transition between the house and school. This was a walk over to my house where I taught them each day. It gave them a safe space as I recognized their need for continued healing and gave space for however that needed to happen. This was also a place to introduce them to what was about to come in the local schools, introducing them to interactions in other students and teachers. A space for beautiful and stepping stone mistakes are welcomed. The days were raw and honest. The days provided the girls with one of many spaces they needed to grow, transform and heal.



The community that surrounded me consisted of the girls' caretakers, the girls, and Joy Reyes. Joy is the founder of New Hope Girls and the one that took me in throughout the time that I was living in the Dominican Republic. Although Joy lived 45 minutes away, she would come to the property about once and week and check in on everything. Often, I would spend the weekends at Joy's house with her family just soaking up everything she said. Especially toward the end of my time in the country, I found myself becoming closer with Joy. From her start with New Hope Girls to where it is now, it is a true God story and I would always hang onto every word when she told the New Hope story to guests. As I hung onto her every word, a seed was planted in me. I'm not sure what that seed will be and when it will blossom (or if it already is blooming) but I know that Joy and New Hope Girls has inspired me for my future of girl/women empowerment. I'll keep you updated on that.



To students applying for Lumos, don't give up. If you get denied, I was. Get back up because it's worth it, apply again. Passion plus a plan equals a project. Take a seat at 8th & Roast Coffee Co, cozy up, and get to researching the hard questions.

To students heading out on their Lumos adventure, you have the tools. You might not know it yet, but you have the tools. Before my journey, I ambitiously prayed for God to bring me to the end of my rope just so I could see what only He could do. Not sure if that was a really dumb prayer or a genius prayer. Nevertheless, I was stretched. I was stretched to trust the people I worked with, trust the girls, trust God, and trust myself because tools from my toolbox would always show up. The Lumos Committee chose you. YOU! And they chose YOU for a reason, don't let yourself forget when you start to doubt, because you will. You're human.

Con amor,

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