

Anas Saba Final Report

I would like to begin this report by saying I am extremely grateful for the opportunity that the Lumos Travel Award and Someone Somewhere gave me to live my dream of working in a foreign country, while doing work that serves to benefit society. While I thoroughly enjoyed my time in Mexico City and with Someone Somewhere, there were adjustments I had to make to make the most of my experience. While living in Querétaro and teaching English had prepared me somewhat for the work culture in Mexico, a new city and new organization presented its own set of challenges.

Interpersonal Relationships with Colleagues | Work Boundaries

In all my previous jobs, work friends were work friends. Maybe we would gather for an occasional team building activity or office happy hour, but that would be the extent of blending personal life with work life. In Mexico, I found my coworkers sharing with me their personal matters and inviting me into their lives. And there was always office gossip. The gossip was never with bad intentions, but still, no secret was safe. I mostly enjoyed the friendlier, more intimate relationships with my colleagues, many of whom became my closest friends. However, I believe it led to two main issues.

In this new cultural environment in the workplace, I was not sure how to conduct myself in front of my supervisors & bosses. I did not want to come off as cold and indifferent, but I also did not want to cross a line by being too friendly. Mexico in general has a very hierarchical cultural structure. It was very normal for my coworkers to ask their boss if they wanted to go with them for lunch, but it was never something I ever became truly comfortable with. My advice to myself and to future Lumos grantees is to talk to your boss about these feelings early on to avoid any confusion.

Another aspect of this issue is that Someone Somewhere, as an organization, struggled to give feedback. In fact, halfway into my grant period, they brought in an organizational behavior expert to give us a weeklong workshop on how to become better communicators and givers of feedback. In one of my first projects, I became discouraged because I had spent a considerable amount of time and effort outlining a proposal for a new marketing initiative we had wanted to undertake. In all the check-in meetings we had, my managers seemed very enthusiastic about it. But after almost two weeks after I submitted the proposal for approval, I had not heard anything back. When I reached out to my manager, he apologized and said that they were moving in a different direction and that I would be assigned a new project.

I did not have an issue with the fact that my proposal wouldn't be used, but that no one would have communicated that to me if I had not asked about it. After that experience, I had a meeting with my manager, and we made improvements in how we communicate with each other. The situation improved, but that initial experience dimmed my enthusiasm a little.

Not Every Day is a Highlight Reel.

I imagine it is common in this type of work, but while Someone Somewhere's mission is to improve the lives of artisans, most of my days did not involve directly interacting with the artisans. However, the chances I did have to meet with artisans reminded me why I wanted to work with Someone Somewhere in the first place. Most artisans live such distinct lives. When I visited Someone's first artisan community in Naupan, Puebla, I observed that most of the artisans speak

Spanish as their second language, and mostly converse in one of Mexico's many indigenous languages, Nahuatl.

The leadership at Someone Somewhere would remind us that on days where we are making reports, contacting suppliers, negotiating with agencies, while it may not feel like the most glamorous work, we are helping to make a difference in the lives of artisans. Sometimes my days were filled with reviewing the website for English spelling errors and making corrections. But then other days I was listening to the stories of these incredible artisans and helping translate their stories to English. Sometimes I would spend hours editing copy for the ads we run, but then I would get to share with artisans reviews from customers who love their work, or go to a national park to take photos of the new artisan products. Below are images from visits to the artisan communities.





















Societal issues in Mexico

While I loved my time in Mexico City and would love to live there again at some point, Mexico City, like anywhere in the world, is not without its share of societal issues. I always felt very safe. Part of that is because I would follow intuition and advice of friends about which areas to visit and which

areas to avoid. If I ever began to feel unsafe in an area, I would trust my instinct and leave. However, I must recognize that as an American coming to Mexico with dollars, I had privileges that most Mexicans don't. The minimum wage in Mexico, which featured a 20% increase in 2023, is slightly over \$10 a day depending on the exchange rate. I paid about \$700 a month for my apartment in Roma, a trendy neighborhood in a central part of Mexico City. By no means was it a luxury apartment and I had three roommates, but it was a prime location in a highly populated city. However, most Mexicans can no longer afford to live in a neighborhood like Roma, as my monthly rent is over two times the minimum monthly salary.

People seeking affordable housing live further from the city center where most of the jobs are. While I was able to enjoy walking to work, biking to cafes, or taking the metro a few stops when I wanted to go somewhere further, for most Mexicans living in Mexico City, public transportation is an arduous and often unsafe part of daily life. As a man, I also did not face the same level of violence that women in Mexico face, where femicide and kidnappings cause so much suffering.

With inflation and thousands of foreigners from countries with higher wages such as the US and various countries in Europe, the cost of living is skyrocketing in Mexico City. Many local businesses have no choice but to close down, as residents get displaced, and the new residents do not shop locally. When deciding where to live, I wanted to be intentional about my decision and how I could least contribute to the problem of displacement. Since I am fluent in Spanish, I easily could have found a better, cheaper apartment in one of the neighborhoods adjacent to Roma. But the more I thought about it, I realized I would just be accelerating the displacement happening in those neighborhoods. Roma, as the most popular neighborhood to live in by foreigners and the hip elite of

Mexico City, has essentially already went through the gentrification / displacement process. I felt that I would not be displacing anyone in Roma, as that process begin many years ago. In a sense, the damage had been done, or at least that's how I rationalized it to myself.

My commitment to myself was that I would support local businesses as frequently as possible, exclusively if I could. Besides a few items I could not find anywhere else but online, or in a large supermarket, I did most of my grocery shopping at local markets. This became the biggest blessing for me. What I cherished the most about my time in Mexico is the little community I created. Not just friends, but the vendors, shopkeepers, and locals who made me feel like I belonged. Below, I am attaching images of the people I became closest to, from my friend who I would frequent multiple times a week to buy chicken, the cobbler who brought life back to my boots, and the sisters who ran one of my favorite taco shops.











Overall, I learned so much during my Lumos award and I am forever grateful for this opportunity. I am excited to take what I have learned from my experience and apply it to the Nashville community. Mexico City truly felt like home to me, but there is work to do in Nashville, too. Though, I do miss riding my bike and the warm weather. I know Mexico City will be there in the future if I ever want to go back, and I am sure one day I will.

Thank you again for this opportunity.