

## Lumos Report

Before I had ever set foot in Guatemala, I had an idea of what I was getting myself into – or at least I thought I did. I knew my Spanish skills were going to be challenged and bettered, I knew I would spend a lot of time with kids, and I knew there would be some difficult moments as well. I expected to try new foods, to feel embarrassed when I misunderstood cultural references, and to learn about the country’s history. I was ready for adventure, and nothing could bog down my excitement.

My first few weeks I was located in Antigua: tourist central. I spent my days taking Spanish classes and getting to know my host family. A few days into my stay, I was informed by my host parents that the recent election was causing quite a bit of turmoil in their country. The people began making blockades in protest to their government, which made travel and trade increasingly difficult. Thankfully, Antigua was fairly unaffected by these blockades and I had no first-hand experience with them. That being said, it was quite the introduction to my seven months in Guatemala. Here are a few photos from my stay in Antigua:



Exploring the markets



Me and my Antigua host family



Santa Catalina Arch

After spending a few weeks in Antigua, I moved to my first project location: Santa Cruz Verapaz. I mainly traveled through the night to get there and I remember waking up and feeling

way more culture shock than when I first entered the country. I believe this was because I was unable to watch my surroundings change while I traveled, so I had no sense of where I was going. When I woke up the next morning, my environment was completely different from the day prior. Instead of a touristy, clean city with cobblestone streets, I stepped outside into a village with dirt roads, houses with tin roofs, and dogs and chickens running all around. Do not misunderstand me, the village and its surrounding areas, especially the mountains, were beautiful in their own way, but nevertheless the change was shocking. I was soon greeted by my three host siblings and the rest is history. They quickly became some of my closest friends. We bonded over the thousands of games of Uno we played together and our never-ending search for *chocobananos*. I cannot thank them enough for being themselves and welcoming me into their home with open arms. Here are a few photos of me with my host siblings and their cousins:



The two and a half months I spent working with Casa Gloria were life changing. Each day brought new opportunities to serve the children who called Casa Gloria home. Some of my favorite memories are giving the kids English classes, helping them with their math homework, and watching their demeanors change for the better every day. Witnessing the kids open up after

experiencing love, safety, and routine for the first time in their lives is something I will never forget. I have said this many times since being home and I will continue to say it: while I might have loved on the kids and supported Casa Gloria in multiple facets, they made more of an impact on my life than I could have ever made on theirs. Those kids have next to nothing, and yet their joy is incomparable to anything I have ever experienced. A few things that I learned throughout my time with Casa Gloria are that love truly does heal, joy does not come from material things, being hospitable does not mean having an abundance of things in your home, and how to say goodbye. Here are a few pictures from my time with Casa Gloria:



Merry Christmas from Casa Gloria!



My last day with the kids at CG.



Arm wrestling one of the teenagers.

After leaving Casa Gloria and having already spent three months in Guatemala, I thought I knew and understood Guatemalan culture. Boy, was I wrong. Just like every other place in the world, visiting two cities does not give you an accurate representation of the whole country, and I was naïve to think that it would. When I first arrived at my host family's house in Chimaltenango, I faced culture shock once again. Their exquisite home was nestled into the heart of the city on several acres of land. Hidden from the street, the walls surrounding the property and all of the greenery throughout the land gave me the feeling of being in a sacred, secret

garden. It truly was beautiful. They proudly informed me that they had hot running water (a luxury after three months of cold showers) as well as a filtered water system, also a luxury. All of these things were amazing, and yet, I struggled with feeling guilty. How could I enjoy all of the beauty and luxuries that my host family had to offer me, when I had just experienced the devastations of poverty on the other side of the country? To be completely honest, I struggled with this feeling for several weeks, maybe even months. Nevertheless, my host family began to warm my heart bit by bit with their kindness and their love for each other and their community. Here is a photo of me with my host parents in Chimaltenango:



Don Mario and Doña Mikaela

My first week serving at Centro Educativo Monte Cristo did not go how I hoped it would. I was sick and had no energy which effected how well I was able to interact with the students as well as the other teachers. My brain fog was intense which meant I could not communicate in Spanish well either. Nevertheless, I slowly started to connect with the students and form

relationships with a few of the teachers too. At Monte Cristo, I assisted with the English, cooking, and music classes and even though I studied ESL, the music classes were my favorite. The students and I had so much fun comparing our favorite artists, learning guitar together, and singing songs with each other. A few of the many things I learned during my time at Monte Cristo include that music truly is a universal language, how to have fun and get stuff done in the classroom, how to laugh at my mistakes, and that you can do anything when you set your mind to it. Here are some photos of me with the Monte Cristo students:



My final day with the seniors.



Spirit week with the 9<sup>th</sup> grade girls.



My fellow chefs!

Although I already knew how amazing of an organization Monte Cristo was, in the last few weeks, I had the opportunity to learn more about the extra programs that run in and around the Monte Cristo network. Monte Cristo's mission is to equip their students with an excellent education as well as a trade that will allow them to stay in Guatemala and support their communities. Some of these areas include the agriculture and culinary programs. Monte Cristo also prioritizes sustainability and being environmentally conscious. They constructed many of their walls out of plastic bottles filled with candy wrappers from the students, they use empty bottles cut in half as flowerpots, and they are extremely conscious of water and electricity usage. Here are a few pictures showing Monte Cristo's trade programs and sustainability practices:



Pigs in the agriculture program.



Wall made from plastic pop bottles.

Guatemala might be known for its picturesque landscapes, vibrant culture, and delicious cuisine, but to me, it is the country that changed my life. Through loving on abandoned children, learning about the country's history, teaching English, music, and cooking, and building life-long relationships, I learned humility and joy in ways I did not know were possible. Although many of my expectations turned out not to be the reality, I accomplished the goals I had set for myself and I learned so much about my host community through the projects I was working on and the people I met. My Lumos experience was truly one I will never forget.