

Final Report
By Lauren Campbell

It has been two months since I moved out of my island bedroom. Since then, I signed a lease for a duplex in a new part of Nashville, got a full-time and a seasonal job, completed my Lumos presentation requirement at Belmont, and more. On my one-month marker of being back home, I was overlooking the Smoky Mountains with a friend I made back in 2023 in Seattle, Washington, while on a mission trip with Belmont. We were at a work conference—almost two years later, and we ran into each other as new co-workers, spending our final moments of the conference having a great conversation about the similar bends and turns our lives had taken. Despite our two-year gap in conversations, we were able to bond over experiences that were significant to us.

These moments that stitch together the years, like a rope bridge between two seemingly isolated experiences, offer me an abundance of hope. There's a lot that happens in the in-between, but all I feel is relief when a great memory from the past is refreshed into something new.

This phenomenon is what I am seeking with the DR. I remind myself that I have yet to inherit the full impact of how my time in the DR will affect my work and personal life in the States. Because now, in the months since I returned home, there's been a gap—*how can I bring some of the DR with me?* I ask myself. My time there was distinctly personal, an experience that only my mind's eye can conjure images from. Now, my environments, work, and life rhythms have completely shifted. I've been affected by it—by the girls, work, experiences, sorrows, laughs, and growth that has resulted from my nine months. A distinctly significant “bridge” moment with another person has yet to come, but I am reminded of the DR often: when I brew coffee in my red greca, listen to merengue, pass a motorcycle on the street, or smell the rich scent of plumeria.

On my final day in the DR, bags stacked by the door, I received an email from a publishing house concerning a job I thought I wasn't going to get. To my surprise, the company offered me a full-time position as a managing editor, complete with a salary, insurance, PTO, and an office to commute to daily. I couldn't believe how this was all coming together. Going back home brought concerns of dreading the empty space in my professional life. Now, in a matter of days, it was completely filled. As I shared the news with the Reyes', I spoke with an uncertainty in my

voice that it couldn't all be real. I hadn't prepared for both leaving the DR and New Hope Girls and beginning a new job to happen at once. As I spent my last day eating a good meal and spending time with their family, it hit me that I was really going home, really saying bye. I had things waiting for me back home, even. It didn't seem real.

Two months later, and I'm still trying to bring things together. My arms feel full with all the memories I'm trying not to forget, and the future plans I'm trying to make. I'm collecting many things, and the display is a bit eclectic at the moment. Now that I am post-grad, I am learning how to furnish my adult life—mentally and physically. Time is now my most finite resource, and I'm currently ambling through a delayed realization that life no longer orbits around hanging out, going to class, and picking up a shift at my old low-stakes, part-time retail job. Now, I have five hours of free time after my 9-to-5, excluding the hours dedicated to simple human maintenance. My friends experienced this last year, and they offer pro-tips when asked—and I have certainly been asking. Like the DR, it's a new challenge I'm grateful for.

Time moved slowly in the DR, as if I were wading through a shallow ocean. Nashville moves at the pace of morning traffic; at once stalled, then all at once rushed down I-65 S with a Buick on your tail. When I'm not experiencing one, I oddly miss the other. I've been missing the DR; but if I went back, I'd miss Nashville again. Reality is somewhere sitting still inside the paradox, and I am spinning a bit. However, I know I am currently in the right place for this time of life. Although as content as I am, I still fantasize about my future.

I have aspirations of working abroad again as an ESL teacher in a Spanish-speaking country, or maybe working in international publishing in Europe; I'll always have an interest in furthering my education and my experiences in non-profit work, and my interest in having my own classroom has not left me either—but that is for another time. I rest knowing that, so far, I was in the right places at the right times, even if I didn't realize it. And, even better, I'll always be unafraid to travel now. There are places I haven't seen yet, and there are friends to visit in the DR.

I'm so thankful for this experience. From a young age, my curiosity toward the rest of the world became the definitive motive for a lot of what I chose to do. Reading was my first vehicle for world exploration, and that desire to see something new—once explored exclusively through libraries and bookshelves—has now become a tangible reality, and books have become the

accessory to that. Ironically, it has all come full circle. The thing that equipped me with a desire to see the world (reading) has become the thing I help create for people all over the world (books). I was lucky to get to go to the DR, and I'm proud that while there I helped create a book that can bring the DR to people all over the world so they can witness the profound work that New Hope Girls is doing, and the joy resulting from rescue.

Until next time,

Hasta luego,

Lauren