

Linear Version

My sister went to Nicaragua for six weeks when she was seventeen years old. She lived with a host family and two other volunteers in her village that she had never met. I was only twelve at the time and I was amazed at how my sister dropped everything and left. She went to a foreign country and more importantly a foreign culture. She didn't take a friend with her. She did it solo.

After my sister came back from her trip, she was a completely different person. It was like she left who she was in Nicaragua. It felt like we were living in two completely different worlds. We would argue over wastefulness and spending money. It almost seemed like she was looking down on me for acting as I always had. Things eventually smoothed over but when I entered high school there was a big push for me to go on the same trip. I was really apprehensive. I didn't speak Spanish as well as she did. I had never been out of the country. And six weeks sounded like a really long time.

It was my junior year of high school when I first went to Monte Cristi, a small town on the northwest coast of the Dominican Republic. I was there for a week with a group of students from my school's community service group. Our faculty sponsor had taken some seniors the year before for their final senior project and decided to put together a spring break trip with the same organization. The trip seemed like a manageable medium between living with a host family on my own and not going on a service trip at all. I had always wanted to do a service trip abroad, I was just scared.

So for the second week of my spring break I was teaching and living in Monte Cristi. We volunteered as English teachers in a local public school and taught two

classes in the morning and two classes in the afternoon. We were responsible for making the lesson plans and running the classroom. We divided ourselves into groups of four to teach. I was the one who spoke the most Spanish.

The first day of class felt like an epic failure. The classroom culture in the Dominican is not at all similar to that in the States. I saw one of the teacher's hit a child with a book when he wasn't paying attention in class. It was then I realized that to have a successful trip I needed to gain the respect of my students. But I only had a week.

Throughout the week there continued to be ups and downs, but every day got better. At the end of the 7 days, I was devastated to leave. I felt so welcome in the community. I saw the potential in my students and wanted to keep working with them. I felt like leaving meant abandoning my students. So when I left, I promised myself I would go back.

I returned to Monte Cristi in April of my senior year for three weeks. My high school's senior experience was designed for students to complete a final three week project of their own design before graduating. I went as an individual volunteer with the same organization as before. I collected food and school supplies donations to the point where my duffel bag weighed 59 pounds. I really didn't know what to expect going back to Monte Cristi, especially as an individual volunteer. I met up with a group from Canada on the way there and when I arrived at the airport in Santiago, Peguero was there waiting to pick me up, just like the year before. It was the same two and a half hour bus ride to Monte Cristi, over unpaved roads, pot holes, and stretches of unlit ground. The day after I arrived I went through the same orientation as, discussing the O360 principles and going over the rules.

I found out I would be teaching at the organization's new local learning center in both the morning and afternoon. I was the only teacher in the classrooms. I made the lesson plans and I taught every part of class. In the morning I taught the both English and Spanish literacy to the same class of three boys. And in the afternoon I taught Spanish literacy to two different classes.

The first day made me wonder why I had returned to Monte Cristi. My lesson plan didn't work at all. My students didn't know me and didn't understand me. I wasn't even working with the same kids as I had the previous year. The first few days were the hardest. But it only got better from there. At the end of the two weeks, I knew I couldn't leave and decided to stay for a third. I had bonded with my students and saw tremendous potential in all of them. They would run up to me on our way to school and tell me about their weekends. If I read *Curious George* or *Dora the Explorer* during reading time, the entire class would fall silent and a gleam of excitement would shimmer in their eyes.

There was no better feeling than seeing my students learn and gain confidence in themselves. As my final week came to a close, I got up early to watch the sunrise over the salt flats, created an epic Friday fun day, and said goodbye to my students. The hardest question I've ever had to answer was when Eduar asked me "Cuando vas a volver?" All I could tell him was that I didn't know when I was coming back.

I wore the same pair of shoes every day I was in Monte Cristi. I walked over every sidewalk, street, and dirt road in these shoes. I climbed El Morro and stood in

these shoes while watching the sun rise over the salt flats. I made all my memories in Monte Cristi while wearing these.

On my last night in Monte Cristi, my friend Tiffany and I decorated my shoes. They were worn down from hiking and had started to tear on the sides. We both wrote the Outreach360 principles and our names on the shoes. It may seem juvenile to decorate shoes, but these are symbols of the home I found in the Dominican Republic. I would put these shoes on in the morning and go down to eat breakfast. They remind me of the sweet cornmeal and peanut butter pancakes with cinnamon. I would walk to the little bakery next to the supermercado and buy a sugar cookie for five Dominican pesos. I would play volleyball in the park across from where I lived with other kids in the neighborhood. On my last day, I walked to the salt flats with Tiffany to watch the sun rise. All of these memories happened while I was standing in these shoes.

The first time I got Alfonso to talk to me, the first time I got Yoel to read out loud to his classmates, when Joan Miguel's face erupted in a smile after sounding out a word when reading, I was wearing these. These shoes are a token of my trip and a reminder of all the people I met, not just my students, but also the leadership team, the other volunteers, and members of the community who welcomed me into la familia Dominicana. When I put these on I can feel the dirt from the walk to school. I can hear Eduar yelling after me on the way to teach afternoon classes. I see the salt flats. I am back in Monte Cristi.

But it is more than the friendships, the scenery, and the experiences that shaped me while in Monte Cristi. Outreach360's ten principles have become an integral part of who I am since I left. I always remember it is important to acknowledge yourself and

what you are doing with/for a community. For me, this extends beyond service.

Acknowledging yourself, whether in school, on a sports team, or in a club is a way to be your own cheerleader. To do well, you have to support yourself. And even though supporting yourself is key to being successful, it's not about you. When you are doing something for a community outside of our own, it is easy to think about what you will get out of the experience, what you will take away. It's easy to forget that service isn't about what the volunteer takes away, it's about what they give. Going into any new situation, it's important to have perspective and ask what you can give to the situation rather than what you can take away from it.

And in a new situation, there is no better time to act than the moment in which you stand. Going forward it is easy to get caught up in a project and forget about the steps you are taking to reach your goal. We all have things we want to accomplish, but how we accomplish them matters just as much as the end result. So on the road to greatness, or wherever you are headed, it's important to remember to communicate love to those around you. It's also important to remember that you can't change the world all at once. While it's good to have overall goals for yourself, each goal has to be accomplished in small steps. Along the way, you will encounter people from all walks of life. It's easy when volunteering to see yourself as helping those less fortunate than yourself. But everyone is smart, wealthy, and lucky, just in different ways. You can serve those who are your equals. So don't help, serve. Remember that everyone around you has something to offer just as much as you do.

Lastly, always be flexible and creative. We encounter unexpected obstacles every day. It's important to understand nothing is concrete and sometimes we have to

adapt to new situations. Reminding yourself to be flexible and creative turns these unexpected obstacles into invitations for new ideas and creative thinking. And in the midst of everything, you must always be responsible, for who you are, your actions, and your ideas.

My experience in Monte Cristi forever changed me. I now plan to apply for a Fulbright grant to teach English somewhere in South America for a year before going to medical school. But more importantly than altering my "path," I learned that everyone has something to give. There is no one who cannot teach you, inspire you, or help you. My heart will forever be in Monte Cristi and I will always be grateful to mi familia Dominicana.