Volunteering, Medical Spanish, and an Inspiring Encounter in Ecuador

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Through the Brody Scholar Summer Enrichment program, I was able to travel to Quito, Ecuador for two weeks to volunteer at the Camp Hope Foundation. While there, I volunteered, took medical Spanish classes, and explored the incredibly beautiful country of Ecuador.

The Volunteering:

Camp Hope Foundation is an organization that provides daily support to disabled children and adults (referred to as children throughout for simplicity), many of whom live at the “Casa de Hogar”, or the orphanage run through the same foundation. Camp Hope runs similarly to a school, where the children arrive in the morning, and go to their respective room, based on age and general ability or activity. As I arrived the first day, I was placed as a volunteer in the “Sala de Gozo”, or the Joy Room, with older children and adults primarily with cerebral palsy. There was one woman who worked there, referred to as the “Tia” (aunt), who was in charge of the room and the activities.

The courtyard outside of the Sala de Gozo – the room of Joy
In this room, a lot of the children had very limited mobility, so one of the therapies they provided was physical stimulation of their extremities, to give the muscles a chance to stretch from being contracted due to cerebral palsy. This was one of the main tasks I performed, providing tactile, physical, and massage-based stimulation to a few of the children. During the mornings while I was there, they also received a snack, so one of the other tasks I did was help feed many of them. One of the individuals I bonded with the most was named Susana (Susi for short), and I ended up working with her a lot at the end of the second week. She was able to respond some in conversation and would smile at things I said or laugh at jokes I made. At times, I found it difficult to communicate what I wanted, which provided a challenge to find other ways to convey similar meaning.

Inside the Sala de Gozo
On the last day of volunteering, they had their monthly birthday celebration, which was a fantastic way to end my time there. Everyone dressed up according to an “Aladdin” theme, and they reenacted the story, with various children representing different characters. Afterward, they took a birthday cake around to each person who had celebrated a birthday that month, and sang individually to them. This was a fun way to wrap up my two weeks at Camp Hope, as it was great to celebrate and dance together.

I have a passion for working with the disabled population, and plan to integrate this in some way in my future medical career, so this volunteer experience greatly enforced that desire, as well as further developed my Spanish-speaking ability. In addition, the challenge I had at times with communication strengthened my ability to adapt to unfamiliar situations, which will be useful in my future career.
The Medical Spanish Classes:

I traveled to Ecuador with two other classmates, and during the afternoons, we took medical Spanish classes at Andean Global Studies, a local program in Ecuador. The three of us had class with a single professor, which provided an intimate, almost one-on-one atmosphere to enhance our learning. We reviewed medical terms in Spanish, as well as practiced patient interviews, which greatly improved our conversational Spanish skills. This will be incredibly beneficial to me, as I aspire to one day practice as a bilingual physician. Although I am not able to speak fluently yet, I will still be able to utilize the conversational Spanish skills I have developed when volunteering as a medical student at the Pitt County Care Clinic, where the patient base is primarily Hispanic and/or Spanish-speaking.

At the end of your time at Andean Global Studies, your handprint goes on the wall with your country’s flag – my handprint on the right next to my two classmates, Jayati and Kaylin

The Country:

On the weekends, we were able to explore the beautiful country of Ecuador, and gain a sense of the culture and the people there. We went hiking a few times (once on an active volcano), went ziplining in the forest, and stood on the Equator line! One of my most cherished memories is from an encounter we had when we traveled to Mindo, a village in the Andes mountains. We met a woman who worked in a bicycle store, as we were booking a cycling tour for that night. Since she was bilingual, my friend asked her if she knew of a store nearby where she could get some medication for symptoms she was having that indicated a potential infection.
The woman told us that there were no stores open nearby, but she had an herbal tea remedy that worked almost instantly for her when she had similar symptoms. Without hesitation and without charging us a penny, she made my friend a cup of tea to take with her when we went to dinner, and another for our bike ride later that night. It not only cured my friend’s symptoms but demonstrated how simple it can be to show compassion and selflessness to a complete stranger. This was an example to me of not only the selfless physician I aspire to be in the future, but of the compassion I hope to show toward others throughout the rest of my life.

One of the various wall art we encountered:

It is not a rose
Nor is it a flower
It is Equality
And it is Love

(unknown source, wall art in Quito, Ecuador)