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Upon entering Costa Rica, I was thrown into a completely different culture for the first time in my life. Quickly, I learned the national slogan, “Pura Vida,” through not only the posters, t-shirts and other paraphernalia that inundates the tourist sites, but more entirely through the expressions and actions of the people. This phrase has a variety of meanings including “Hello,” “Good, thank you,” “Life is great” and “Whoa, that is the coolest thing I have ever seen!” But to really understand this national catch-phrase to its full extent, I had to live there and experience it.

I was placed in IDA San Luis, a small rural town in the northern part of the country near the base of three local—some being active—volcanoes. The town of 300 residents was cut out of the jungle a mere fifty years ago to create an agricultural community, which would grow anything from the five types of bananas found in the region to tomatoes, coconut, limes, lemons, oranges, mango, and a variety of other fruits native to their land. There is no phone or Internet in the town and, seeing as it lies in a valley, smoke signals may not be helpful either.

I lived with a young family in a small house of premiere location; I was never bored. My host mother and father always made me laugh. My host grandmother showed me how to cook traditional meals, dance merengue and spoil grandchildren. My host uncle taught me the importance, the passion and the necessity of soccer, an essential element of having a healthy lifestyle. Neighbors showed me kindness. The teenagers of the town showed me how to fit in as best as I could. The students I taught showed me... patience. However, I learned the most from

one small group of people in the town: my host brother and sisters. It was not so much what they did but what they expected from me during the time we spent together.

These host sisters and a two-year-old host brother (himself, always demanding royal treatment) provided me with both a form of entertainment and a challenge. The entertainment consisted of these young children exploring the world and also trying to figure out how an English-speaking, red-headed “gringo” fit into their lives. Once they quickly figured out that it did not matter that I was so different, they expected the same out of me as they did everyone else in the town; this was the challenge. First, they expected me to be completely fluent in Spanish; I was not. Second, they expected that I knew all the members of the family, the town, its history and all the folk and nursery rhymes that follow; I did not. Lastly, they expected that I would be as reliable as everyone else in town; that is, I was expected to help with work around the house, to carry water and food, and to teach them about life in general. I found out that I was reliable and I did help as much as everyone else. It was the large amount of time that I spent with my brothers and sisters that made me realize a possible changing significance in my life.

As I already mentioned, I was taken in by the town eagerly, appreciatively and lovingly. Always with smiles and kind gestures, everyone in the town offered a greeting while passing. The numerous invitations to “*cafecitos*” (coffee time) showed their openness and willingness to meet, accept and respect a total stranger. Being only the third “gringo” in the town’s history, this was very impressive and I was greatly influenced by their example. It is something that I try to emulate back here at Notre Dame: an unforced openness and kindness that shows everyone, from any background, that they are welcome.

In such isolation, relationships are positively forged and hard to break. Sisters take care of sisters, brothers take care of their brothers, and neighbors, similarly, look after one another.

Life is simple—without cable TV, phones or Internet. In order to find out about anyone in the town, personal interaction is necessary. The people of the town grow most of their own food, sharing and trading between families to have a balanced diet. My town hosted a benefit dance to raise money for another nearby town in desperate need of a new community center. When the water frequently went out throughout town, those with rain water reserves generously shared with the community and school. After terrible downpours, one of the eighteen bridges between this town and the nearest other may be wiped out; the surrounding towns make sure people make it back home safely offering their own cars, motorcycles, horses, etc. From all these examples, it is easy to see that these people not only live *by* and *with* themselves, isolated from a larger society, but also they live *for* each other because in this isolation, interdependence among the community members is necessary.

So what *does* “Pura Vida” actually mean? The literal translation is “Pure Life” or “The Good Life.” Judging from where and how they live, it may be hard to comprehend how this phrase captures the people. But in the end after all of my experiences, I learned a few things: it is the relationships that matter; it is the people in this world that you need most; the love that surrounds you is that which truly gives wealth. Without many distracting outside influences, the pureness of what it means to have a good life remains. It is this good, pure life that in the end we all seek. My family and town in Costa Rica did not teach me everything about “Pura Vida,” but they did open my eyes to what is actually important in this world. For this reason, I can never shower them with enough thanks.