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Upon my arrival in Oaxaca, I was aware that I would be working with a microfinance organization. I was also aware that Microfinance was the latest method in helping the underprivileged in developing countries. Needless to say, I was excited to be working with Fuentes Libres, the microfinance organization with which I interned. I had high expectations for the organization; they had a functioning website and had been in operation for over ten years. But my concept of how microfinance organizations worked and their reality were really two different things. From this I was driven to help Fuentes Libres become more efficient and effective in aiding the disadvantaged in the Oaxaca community.

My first day on the job was daunting; I had only been in Oaxaca for a few days and my Spanish was rusty and neither the President of Fuentes Libres (Guillermo) nor the Promotora (Laura) spoke English. I concentrated on each word they said. Essentially my task for the summer was to observe how the organization worked and offer useful suggestions as to how Fuentes could improve itself; I was their consultant, and that sounded wonderful to me. I had some prior experience in consulting work and I was ready to put my laptop to use doing extensive research. This NGO was going to have some radical ideas to enhance their operations before I left Oaxaca.

Fuentes organizes a group of between twelve and twenty women. To this group they give money to be divided evenly between the women. The women then use this money to start a small business (usually selling food or traditional crafts) or enhance a business that they already have. These groups of women meet each week to have a small reflection and repay a pre-designated amount of the microloan. Ideally the women could completely repay the loans in four months,

but as I discovered this was not always the case.

As the consultant for Fuentes Libres, I designated one week to conduct interviews with each group in order to obtain some data for my research. As Laura and I traveled each day to the four different groups around Oaxaca, I asked each woman from the groups in Cuilapam de Guerrero, Santa Anita, Rojas de Cuauhtémoc and Tlacolula de Matamoros to quantify the average amount of money they invested in their business each week (i.e. tools, ingredients for food, supplies for artisan crafts) versus the amount of money they made each week. From this survey I discovered that the majority of the women rarely broke-even each week. Because of this, as the months progressed the women found more and more difficulty in repaying their weekly installments. If the women were not able to find money from a relative or a friend, they would end up defaulting on the loan and the remainder of the group would be forced to cooperatively pay what the defaulter could not. This happened more often than not; one of the banks was even on the brink of closing because ten out of the fifteen women were unable to put in any payments on time.

Once I discovered this I began to look for examples of how other microfinance institutions have dealt with such problems. This was the bulk of my work: I observed, found something wrong or inefficient, did research, and presented possible solutions to the problem. Although I went to the Fuentes office almost every day and visited the groups of women each Monday through Thursday, my research was very independent. I had to be very self motivated to get the work and research done in the way that Fuentes needed me to.

In addition to creating surveys for the women, I was also given the opportunity to travel to Colonia Benito Juárez in Tehuantepec, a portion of Oaxaca that is located in the Isthmus. I learned so much more about how Fuentes oversees and maintains the banks. The two banks that I

visited in Tehuantepec have been functioning on their own for several years, without having to rely on money from Fuentes. The leaders in these banks appeared to work more efficiently in their accounting methods after years of trial and error. These groups were, however, not without their fair share of difficulties. Similar to the other groups in Oaxaca City, they faced problems of missing payments. This struck me as a bit strange; after several years of operation these small banks still had problems with recording and even trust within the group. The bank's members accused the leaders of purposefully recoding the payments incorrectly. After seeing how prevalent this inefficiency was throughout the banks set up by Fuentes, my passion became even greater. I wanted to find the source and try to advise Fuentes on how to avoid such problems in the future. The final presentation was extensive; however the women in the banks found my suggestions to be very helpful. They even planned on implementing some of them. In addition, both the President and Promotora of Fuentes Libres were extremely thankful for the work that I had done.

Outside of my work with Fuentes Libres, I was able to fully experience all that Oaxaca had to offer through ProMexico. ProMexico often facilitated my integration into the Oaxacan culture. For example, every Wednesday all the interns and the ProMexico staff would have dinner together at typical Oaxacan restaurants (as opposed to Westernized restaurants). We also performed various community service projects as a group; on two separate occasions we painted an orphanage and helped a local women's cooperative with various tasks they needed to be completed. One Saturday, ProMexico paid for a hiking trip through the Sierra Norte Mountains. ProMexico also sponsored trips to various culturally significant markets. Apart from ProMexico sponsored events, I was able to travel to Puerto Escondido, one of the beautiful beaches in the State of Oaxaca. I was also privileged enough to travel to Tule and Hierve el Agua. The epitome

of Oaxaca's culture was encompassed in the Guelaguetza Popular: the Guelaguetza's performances are phenomenal and unlike anything I have ever seen. It was truly a wonderful experience.

On the whole my time in Oaxaca was wonderful! I am so grateful that I was able to spend my summer in such an amazing place. I was able to do work that actually made a difference in the lives of several women and a wonderful organization. Additionally, I was able to fully immerse myself in a completely different culture and enhance my Spanish speaking capabilities. Traveling to Oaxaca was my first time outside of the country; I must say that I was skeptical that I would really enjoy myself and feel as though my time had been spent in a worthwhile cause. Upon reflection of my experiences, I will dare to say that I found my time in Oaxaca to be life changing.