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The six weeks I spent at Fundación San Rafael in Asunción, Paraguay were challenging and formative. Most of my work was in the elementary school Pa'I Alberto, and the orphanage, called the "Little House of Bethlehem".

At Pa'I Alberto, I was specifically working with a nine-year-old child who suffers from PTSD with unmanageable symptoms. I tutored him in reading, writing, and math, and gave him art assignments designed to help him explore and understand his emotions. I participated in training on "inclusive education", and I worked with the school's director and professors as they restructured the way students with psychiatric and developmental difficulties are integrated into the classroom setting. Additionally, I collaborated with the school therapist and psychiatrists from Paraguay's Ministry of Public Health and Social Welfare to develop a comprehensive plan of treatment for the boy, involving both physician care and psychotherapy. At the "Little House of Bethlehem", I helped care for eighteen children ages three through seven; my specific responsibilities changed daily. I also periodically met with a group of single teenage mothers living together in the Foundation's "House of Chiquitunga".

The greatest challenge I experienced was my identity as an outsider, a foreigner to Asunción. Though at the Fundación I was immediately welcomed as part of the team, on the streets of Paraguay my appearance and accent clearly marked me as a foreigner, and I was treated as such. I often received unwelcome stares, comments or questions. The experience was also exhausting at times, both because of the intense suffering I encountered and due to the high number of hours I was working. I was faced with profoundly painful and seemingly senseless suffering, of the handicapped confined to bed-rest, of children who only knew the violence of the

slums, of the homeless and terminally ill. Finally, as I immersed myself in the work, another challenge emerged: learning more and more about the profound structural and cyclical poverty left me feeling both frustrated and helpless.

As painful and difficult as it was at times, the rewards of the experience were far more significant than the challenges. I didn't begin the experience with a narrow question or idea, but with an openness that allowed me to whole-heartedly put myself and my hard work at the disposition of Padre Aldo Trento (director of the Foundation). As a result, this summer's experience tremendously accelerated my personal growth, cultural awareness, and commitment to social justice.

Day after day, I was asked to push past the boundary of my comfort, the self-imposed limit that prevented me from involving my whole self. The suffering I faced forced me to confront my ignorance, powerlessness, privilege and selective blindness. The stories of the young mothers and handicapped children whom I met challenged my preconceptions and replaced them with a desire to learn. In sharing their lives with me, the women of the "House of Chiquitunga" taught me to value their experience of life, their culture, their way of living their faith; these encounters affirmed their dignity, and the respect due to all the poor. My frustration at the incomprehensible and inescapable problems associated with poverty gradually changed into the understanding that all laws and economic policies, if they are to promote the common good, must be at the service of the poor. Those with whom I worked were well aware of the depth and prevalence of the problems addressed by Fundación San Rafael; rather than respond with hopelessness or anger, however, they focused on each child or patient of the Fundación with fervent commitment and loving attentiveness. This affirmed for me the importance of interpersonal connections and the value of encounter. The educators and providers of the

Fundación appeared inexhaustible and joyful in their work; as Padre Aldo explained it to me, all of the Fundación's work is centered around the Eucharist. Moved by the infinite love of the Father for each his or her own self, each of the staff in turn is able to bring that love and mercy to the poor.

My summer in Paraguay was profoundly different from any previous time abroad. I have studied in Italy multiple times, and I have traveled as a tourist around Europe, but I have never had a similar experience.

First of all, Paraguay is not a tourist destination: I met very few foreigners in Asunción, never heard English, and was exclusively surrounded by Paraguayan culture. Paraguay has the best-preserved indigenous language of all of South America (ninety percent of the population is fluent in Guaraní). I was able to learn much about the traditional Guaraní culture through visiting a few museums and talking with the women of the "House of Chiquitunga", most of whom are from rural areas. Also, I celebrated holidays and attended religious or cultural events with my coworkers; this led me to a deeper awareness of the complexity and history of the culture I was immersed in.

Even more importantly, my experience was set apart by the way I was engaged with those with whom I worked. The service I performed was not "giving aid", "doing good", or "helping them help themselves". Rather, I was invited to participate in the life of the Foundation as one of their own, to accompany them closely on their path. I got to know the stories of the teenage mothers, the troubles and desires of the young orphans, the worries of overworked and underpaid parents, and the obstacles faced by those who help the poor. I recognized my own inability and state of need, and also my responsibility to do what I can with what I have.

Thus, I plan to continue learning from my summer experience through civic engagement. Specifically, I will be working with the children detained at the Juvenile Justice Center this fall, in a teaching program about emotional regulation and the working of the brain. Also, I will be attending the International Open House to explore future abroad opportunities; I hope to return to South America, either with a research fellowship or through study abroad.