

FIMRC: Promoting Holistic Care in Costa Rica

“¡*Tuanis, mae!*” an old man yelled almost weekly as he entered the clinic from El Jazmin, a community located in the ring of poverty surrounding the base of the mountain by our clinic. His wife came to the clinic often to pick up her monthly supply of vitamins, and he came simply to entertain us with Costa Rican greetings and expressions. After chatting for several minutes, he would add, “¡*Pura vida!*” as he hugged each of us and walked out the door. As I continued to live and work in Costa Rica, I came to see just how meaningful those words are—enveloping a culture that champions being friendly, forgiving, relaxed, considerate of others, and happy with the people that surround you. Life truly is pure in Costa Rica, and I was grateful each day for the many opportunities that I had to become a part of the *pura vida* culture by living and working with people who demonstrated it so well.

With each day in the clinic came new challenges, and every challenge ushered in an opportunity to learn more about the culture, common medical issues, and, most importantly, the community members of Alajuelita. I spent time each week working at the reception desk, in the pharmacy, with the psychologist, with the doctor, and in a nearby soup kitchen and childcare facility. Many afternoons, my time was dedicated to education initiatives that promote healthy practices or help community members understand common illnesses, such as diabetes, hypertension, and asthma. Oftentimes, our education programs were followed by an activity promoting healthy physical activity, such as a dodgeball game with the children or dance lessons with the mothers. Through the health education initiatives, I was able to connect on a different

level with the community members, and it was rewarding to see the group of families that attended the sessions grow in size and comfort week after week.

By rotating through each area of the clinic and helping with health education, I garnered a more complete understanding of what it means to ensure the right of health in a community. We began with health promotion through education, ensured holistic medical attention with a doctor and a psychologist on site, and finished with proper medication, treatments, referrals, and resources, such as toothbrushes. Health education is perhaps the most important step in ensuring the health of a community because it provides an important foundation upon which the lifestyle and medical practices of a community are built. With my team, I played a large role in planning and presenting education about asthma, healthy eating, oral care, healthy stress management, aging healthily, hypertension, various parasites, and major vector-borne illnesses that threaten the region. This component of my job benefited me by allowing me to research and learn more about each of these topics. Furthermore, I continued to learn about these and other health concerns as I saw the manifestations of these illnesses in patients that came to the clinic for care from the doctor, who generously answered questions and explained the patient's conditions while I shadowed her.

Similarly, I was happy to see that mental health is taken seriously and openly discussed in Costa Rica, contrasting greatly to the stigma that it carries in the United States. People came often to seek treatment from the psychologist on site, and shadowing her gave me another perspective on the mental, social, and societal problems facing the community of Alajuelita. Because many of the clinic's patients are Nicaraguan immigrants, I learned a lot about the complexities of emigrating from one country to another and the damage that can ensue, as well as the long-term process of repairing that damage and improving familial relationships. In

addition, I found it enlightening to work with an immigrant population and to observe that the majority of Costa Ricans view immigrants as an essential and productive part of the economy, which grossly contrasts the views held by some in the United States. Because Costa Rica and the United States are both relatively successful nations in terms of economic and governmental stability, it was very fascinating to see how differently they approach immigration. Aside from immigration, the two nations differ greatly in other systems, such as social insurance, healthcare, and education, and I benefited from having the opportunity to compare the strengths and weaknesses of different political and social systems operating around the world.

Beyond my roles working at the front desk, in the pharmacy, and assisting the doctor and psychologist, I found myself to be useful in the clinic in ways that I had not expected, relying on skills of flexibility, communication, creative thinking, and patience. Because the clinic receives new groups of volunteers each week, it was necessary to train each new volunteer that came to the clinic. I had experience working in each position in the clinic, so I was well equipped to help the weekly volunteers get comfortable in each job. As a result, it was necessary to adapt my own role in the clinic depending on the unique strengths that each group brought to the clinic. Like a muscle, I stretched myself into newer dimensions and grew, even if that meant that I was sore at times. The role of coordinating volunteers was enriching in several ways, as it helped me learn to work with a wide range of skillsets in different group settings, and it improved my ability to identify and capitalize on the strengths that each individual brings to the team. Furthermore, being able to coordinate volunteers, answer questions, and oversee the work being done in each position lessened the workload for the clinic's field operation manager, and it gave him more time to begin developing long-term projects while I assisted with the day-to-day operations in the clinic.

In addition to helping with the daily operations of the clinic, I had the opportunity to help with several long-term projects. For example, I helped my boss gather data for each monthly report, which he sent to the headquarters in Philadelphia. Additionally, I used English to help prepare materials for volunteers, such as a detailed manual to orient future volunteers and to guide them in the clinic's daily operations. English continued to enable me to have a greater role in the community of Alajuelita, as I enjoyed helping the children that came to the clinic practice pronunciation and vocabulary before big English tests in school. In contrast, I was also happy to use and improve upon my Spanish-speaking abilities when communicating with patients, preparing brochures and posters for health education, and assisting the volunteers that couldn't speak Spanish. Finally, I partnered with another intern to prepare an early stimulation project for use with the infants and toddlers in the soup kitchen's day care. Because the first few years are so important in a child's development, it is important to ensure the right amount, kind, and variety of stimulation during a child's day-to-day exploration. Using the background materials and activity schedule that I prepared with another intern, future volunteers will have the opportunity to promote healthy motor, emotional, and sensory development in infants.

In sum, my summer internship with FIMRC through the Kellogg Institute is one of the most enriching experiences that I have had, and I am so grateful for every moment I had to live, learn, and serve in Costa Rica. My experience allowed me to learn more about the process of ensuring the right of health, to immerse myself in a new culture, and to experience the natural beauty of Costa Rica's scenery and people. I hope to always remember with gratitude the sunrises I watched from my balcony, the colorfully painted homes ascending the muddy road on the mountainside, and the cheerful smiles shared by my friends and family in Costa Rica.

Similarly, the skills that I gained in Costa Rica not only informed me about the region, but also allowed me to dissect various themes that I will carry on in my future career endeavors.

By comparing the culture and systems in Costa Rica to the ones that I was raised with in the United States, I have grown in critical and creative thinking, and I am grateful for the opportunity to approach issues with two distinct perspectives in mind. In addition to learning from the culture, I learned so much from my time spent inside the clinic. Beyond learning about common illnesses and the healthcare system, I was also blessed to work with a lively and inspiring clinic staff, whose positive attitudes and energy brought infectious joy to the workplace and touched the lives of the entire community. From them, I learned that providing excellent healthcare goes beyond care itself, ensuring that community members feel dignified, valued, educated, and empowered to pursue excellent health for themselves and their families. The culture, the people, and the lessons that I learned in Costa Rica have changed me for the better, and I am grateful to walk away from this experience with more critical ways of thinking, friends across borders, and new ideas and inspirations to propel me forward in my education and career.