

La Bandera

C I E E S E R V I C E - L E A R N I N G S A N T I A G O , D R



View from Cabañas at Rio Limpio, Elias Piña

To the Rios!

Table of Contents

- Page 2 Celia Arias
Simmons College
- Page 3 Maggie Federici
Clark University
- Page 4 Jacob Taddy
University of Wisconsin, Madison
- Page 4 Lila Trowbridge
Clark University
- Page 5 Rachel Keller
Kenyon College
- Page 6 Maria Goins
Johnson C. Smith University
- Page 7 Kendra O'Connor
The George Washington University
- Page 8 Lexa Panagore
Clark University
- Page 8 Aysha Abraibesh
Clark University
- Page 9 SL Blog Preview
- Page 10 Alumni Updates

Saludos,

In our previous newsletter, our CIEE study center in Santiago, DR introduced its readers to the new life and culture of Santiago, ranging from its transportation systems to the local foods and customs. Now, midway through our semester we find ourselves more informed about the history, culture and geography of the DR, and deep into our independent research and capstone projects in a total of 9 local communities between all of us.

During the month of February we had two rural community visits to gain a deeper understanding of rural livelihoods. Our first trip was the *retiro de trabajo* or work retreat where we visited Rio Grande Abajo, a rural community located in the Puerto Plata province in the mountainous municipality of Alta Mira. There we collaborated with *Brigada Verde*, a formalized youth group with a focus on Sustainable environmental practices. Together we gave talks on disease prevention and sanitary practices. We also helped in providing a *chispa* or spark to build momentum and awareness around the group's new waste management initiative.

As another integral part of the program, we had our week long Rural Stay in an isolated community in the northwest region to learn with the Regional Center of Alternative and Rural Studies (CREAR). CREAR is the first organic school in the DR and its philosophy is to learn how to do things with what you have and that success in the task is as much a part of the process as it is the *gusto* or spirit you employ during the process. This sounds simple but the application of the philosophy was challenging during a time when many of us were stressed, tired and doubting various aspects of our work in our communities in Santiago, challenging our paradigm of "good intentions" and international development. This lesson in learning to be a learner and then working hard with both patience and faith in our work was transformative and unforgettable.

As you will read in detail, we learned about organic farming methods, constructed ecological Lorena stoves and compared community initiatives that related to our work back in the Santiago. With new perspectives on both the city and the countryside, this newsletter hopes to provide you with an expanded insight into how we invest our time stretching, challenging and relearning concepts of development through the grassroots perspective.



Community Development

Overcoming Stigmas

By Celia Arias: Simmons College

Our visit to Rio Limpio was a transformative experience. We had the opportunity to work with several community organizations such as CREAR, a nonprofit organization that maintains a field with an ample educational program of investigation and promotion of organic and sustainable agriculture; the Dominican Service of Local Eco Touristic Integral Development; and Piso Verde, a biodynamic and organic coffee farm.

This community has fought various stereotypes of ignorance, underdevelopment and lack of education that come along with the notions of *campo* (the countryside) life and experiences. Like many rural environments, this community does have its limitations such as lack of electricity, potable water, medical facilities and networks of communication, as well as education and economical opportunities for employment. The community is located in a mountainous and rocky area where the travel and navigation is difficult. Rio Limpio, however has demonstrated great achievements in the area of development and education. For example, the community is very well developed in terms of the education that it offers its students.

CREAR has established four programs. First is the Agro ecological high school, the experimental and demonstrative organic-biodynamic field, the capacity and training program and finally the program of investigation and organic demonstration. CREAR selects a group of students from rural communities in both the DR and Haiti and are admitted their junior year to learn about the application and theories of organic farming while completing their high school general education courses. The are awarded with a high school diploma and a technical degree in organic agriculture. With this, the community is capacity-building through this group of students with the understanding of sustainable agricultural processes not only in the community, but in other communities across the island as students return home with what they learned. CREAR's teaching model is effective and productive because it works from within the community to change the agricultural practices and to train the farmers as promoters of sustainable agriculture. In signaling the importance that the *campesinos* have in the community,

CREAR has taught the *campesinos* in the practices of sustainable agriculture to combat traditional agricultural practices involving 'slash and burn' and the use of potent pesticides that contaminate the fields thus eliminating the natural and virgin land. Over time a cycle of erosion, small cultivations, poverty and migration to the city has occurred, resulting in economic, social and environmental hardships and damages. For this reason, CREAR plays an important role in providing the knowledge and practice of sustainable agriculture. As a result, Rio Limpio is a community that with the aid and assistance from international sponsorship and partnership has valued its natural resources and has put them to use for the wellbeing of the community.

The community of Rio Limpio does a great job of maintaining a healthy environment for all its members. For example, the community has a strong presence of Haitian immigrants that have come to the land for a better opportunity. Rio Limpio has established a learning center where the local Haitians can learn Spanish and Creole in hopes to expand their academic and economical opportunities.

Overall, the community has defeated the general stigmas and stereotypes of the rural area and has adopted ways of transforming its members into active responsible leaders in particular of sustainable agriculture.



Motivating Youth: Rural vs. Urban Contexts

By Maggie Federici: Clark University

The motivation of youth is a very complicated subject of investigation, and involves analysis of home life, socioeconomic status, physical environment, learning styles, educational backgrounds, etc. During my time in the Dominican Republic, I have found that motivating youth to spearhead local community action is dependent on several variables. One of the key factors that I have identified in recent experience is geographic location: *campo* (rural) vs. *ciudad* (city).

My empirical evidence comes from my work in an impoverished urban community called Los Platanitos in Santiago, and from my experience in Río Limpio. There, I was introduced to an emerging youth-led initiative called J.A.M.S. (Youth Realizing Goals and Dreams). The students of J.A.M.S. are in their third and fourth years of CREAR, and they themselves formed the group after viewing Al Gore's documentary *An Inconvenient Truth*, which mobilized them to slow the global warming process in their own community by educating their neighbors about the dangers of pollution and the benefits of farming without chemical fertilizer.

Al Gore was definitely not their only inspiration. Simply having been raised in the *campo* means that J.A.M.S. has always possessed a direct connection with their natural habitat. At CREAR, students eat what they themselves have helped plant. They are directly affected by the destruction of their environment, and have incredibly influential mentors at the school who emphasize the need to nurture the connections between human and soil. They quite literally enjoy the fruits of their labor, and in this way, they possess a reciprocal relationship with the land that they are so inspired to protect. They have been shown the steps towards their goals and are actively participating in the journey to their own futures.

The youth of Los Platanitos are still developing key personal values. They are re-constructing their concept of what is right and wrong, and find difficulty in giving concrete examples for each. Their struggles stem from the shortcomings of the public education system, the poverty of their small migrant community, their lack of connections with the natural environment, and the absence of strong community leaders and mentors. For many, Oné Respe (the organization I'm currently working with) is the sole provider of non-traditional education and one-on-one support. One of the initiatives currently on its agenda is to spark a youth-launched project to clean up the river that runs through Los Platanitos and serves as the neighborhood dump. The kids recognize the enormity of the problem and have expressed interest in addressing it themselves, but thus far have been unable to take the matter into their own hands.

The youth of Río Limpio and Los Platanitos are bright, energetic, personable, and full of potential. In light of limited resources and copious familial responsibilities, their spirit never seems to wane. I hope that by bringing to Los Platanitos a little bit of what J.A.M.S. was founded on, together we can transcend urban constraints on youth empowerment. Paula, J.A.M.S. secretary, offered the following advice to our cause: "Cuando se quiere, se puede," which means, "When one wants, one can." It is clear that the youth of Los Platanitos want a change; what they need is the conviction and the self-assurance to know that their desire to act is just one step away from the actual action itself. I feel that my role as a volunteer is to help them recognize their ability to transform their community into one that will prepare them for the futures they've imagined.



Our group hikes past five rivers with CREAR students to a Biodynamic farm.

Cooperativas

By Jacob Taddy: University of Wisconsin, Madison



The largest learning experience for me so far here has been witnessing some unique and successful models of community development. We have read about the importance of solidarity, that working together and helping ones neighbor is a deep-seated part of Dominican culture. My degree at the University of Wisconsin, Madison is Community and Non-Profit Leadership, and being able to see community organizing put into action to truly benefit an entire population is both encouraging and inspiring for a future in community development.

Our visits to Rio Grande and Rio Limpio had ideal implementations of cooperatives. In Rio Grande, the center of the community consisted of a *colmado* (general store), which had a pool table hang-out above it, and a discoteca that also functioned as a community center with its communal TV and public space. All of this was owned as a cooperative. Over 70 members of Rio Grande own and operate this space together, allowing for pooled resources to provide it for their community.

In Rio Limpio, even the cabins we stayed in were a cooperative, benefitting local groups. I had the privilege of meeting with the president of a newly formed coffee cooperative, with over 90 farms, selling their coffee (both whole and processed beans) around the country and even around the world. To see these communities come together, pool resources, and accomplish things they would not have been able to do on their own, for the benefit of all, is a suitable goal for other similar communities.

These experiences have had a great impact on my investigation and Capstone project for the semester working with a group of artisans called Arte a Mano. After seeing models of success in Rio Grande and Rio Limpio and learning about the process, I have been able to bring these ideas to the group as a possible future, and it seems like it will be a perfect fit for the mission, purpose, and hopes of Arte a Mano.

Development, Short and Long Term as Seen in Rio Limpio

By Lila Trowbridge: Clark University



As a study abroad student, it is difficult for me to see the fruits of my labor. I work at Niños con una Esperanza, an after-school program for children in a poor district of Santiago. As I am only officially working there for four months, I feel that my presence is only a mere blip in the grand scale of development for the organization. Niños con una Esperanza exists primarily to prevent kids from working in a giant dump located only blocks away. These children, who face the daily struggles of hunger, neglect and youth delinquency, are taught to be tough from a very early age. Although I am excited about my project of implementing a leadership program for youths there, I often feel the frustrations of having to start something without ever seeing what will become of it.

My visit to Rio Limpio, helped me to see the long-term effects of positive development. When I arrived in Rio Limpio, I was completely taken-aback by the sense of community that I felt there. Everyone was so welcoming; the first night we attended a bonfire where Americans and Dominicans alike participated in an impromptu talent show and shared stories. Over the next few days I spent time with both high schoolers and community elders, all of whom repeatedly expressed a deep pride and sense of belonging towards their little town. I kept asking myself, how could this place be so full of unity and passion, while my own project in Santiago showed little to none of these qualities? Did it have to do with countryside versus city life? Was my perception skewed by the fact that I was only visiting for a short period of time? I kept mulling it over.

One of the main reasons, I believe, has to do with time. Rio Limpio has a long history in the development process, as can be seen in its innovative education system. Starting with a project by a two Peace Corps members in 1982 to create a center for agricultural learning, the town of Rio Limpio has experienced much international support and aid. CREAR is now a successful agricultural high school for youths from all of the country. The organization, however, has had a lot of ups and downs. There was a period of a few years, for example, when none of the employees were being paid for their work and another few years when the school was completely shut down. Despite these setbacks, the school struggled on. From what I have observed, the farmers and teachers have passion for the work that they do; they felt a connection with the earth as well as with the youth of CREAR who might one day take their places as stewards of the land. I believe that the secret to the resilience of CREAR lies in its people (foreigners and locals alike) who believed strongly that the school was important. The very fact that the original idea of CREAR has been molded and developed over time through the processes of trial and error is the reason why the school still exists.

My observations in Rio Limpio showed me that what is most important for the success of my service project in Santiago is that I help to instill hope and excitement for positive change within the group of "leaders" that I am attempting to form. When I leave, my leadership project will take another shape. It will only continue, however, if there are people who want to carry it. Local and international development is a long process, but it needs people to believe that the small steps are necessary. After my visit to Rio Limpio, I am much more accepting of the fact that my work is part of a trajectory; it is just one step in the many more that are to come.

Foreign Ideas and a Strong Community

By Rachel Keller: Kenyon College



During our stay in Rio Limpio we dove right into the daily life of its members and experienced first-hand the benefits of a strong community. Different groups within Rio Limpio form the solid, rural community. Every day there, we worked with the CREAR school and its students. The school has had a huge influence on the growth and sustainability of the village. The students and teachers' energy and enthusiasm for CREAR and Rio Limpio were contagious.

On the last day of our week-long stay, I unexpectedly found myself accepted into another group. We had a few free hours before dinner so a few of us walked to the baseball field to watch the Dominicans' favorite sport: Baseball!

The village team of seven and eight-year olds was having its daily practice so we sat on the dusty sidelines to watch. The other students left shortly afterwards but I stayed, grabbed a glove and followed a pointed finger to third base. The boys acted like brothers: they wrestled in the outfield, shared shoes and walked each other home after practice. I spent three hours at the field, completely engulfed in the game and the team.

That night at dinner I talked with members of another visiting group from Sweden. They were staying for a month and building a playground.

A playground? Here in a valley of beautiful, untouched mountains? Here where kids made up games in the streets, made balls out of newspaper-filled socks and worked alongside



their parents? The idea sounded like an odd, foreign white-elephant. They thought Rio Limpio needed more community support and believed building a playground would provide the space and opportunity for children to play.

I had just spent the afternoon with a team of boys who were running their own community in a make-shift field. We had spent all week working with CREAR students and farmers who were solid communities. A plastic playground wasn't necessary. These groups offered everything a community could.

The building of a playground in Rio Limpio would be an intrusion on the environment, it would be a transplanted idea of how to create and use community space. Even though the Swedish group had good intentions, their presence and work on a playground meant bringing in outside ideas that could possibly impact Rio Limpio in unforeseen ways.



While I was weighing the possible positive and negative outcomes, I realized that Rio Limpio had already faced the introduction of foreign ideas. CREAR was started by a Peace Corps worker and received further outside support from Europe. The boys' love for baseball and for their team was for a sport that is known as "America's Pastime".

The CREAR school and the baseball team showed me the importance and strength of community in Rio Limpio. But the ideas of both groups sprouted in the US and made their way to the village. The community molded and honed them. The school and the sport gave people interests to share and opportunities to gather together. A new playground might have more positive effects than negative consequences. But what is known is that the community of Rio Limpio can self-determine their own future empowered to maintain projects of interest or to reject them altogether.

Service Learning

Making the Abono

By Marla Goins: Johnson C. Smith University

One of our projects during our stay in Rio Limpio was to make an *abono*. Before coming to make the structure, I didn't know what an *abono* was. We entered the farming fields and I saw a pig pen and a big block of dirt with a stick protruding out of the side. We were going to make one of those blocks—using the poop from the pigs. Disgusted, I thought 'pig poop? Out of all of the poops in the world, you use pig poop? That's, like, the smelliest, dirtiest crap you could use. I mean, pigs eat their own crap, so it's probably even more—ugghh!—the second time around. I don't want to touch it.' My outlook on making the fertilizing structure didn't look too positive. I saw myself getting nauseous and bending over, and the image looked pretty realistic.

Then I realized that, as the *abono* was composed of various layers of less detestable things, I might not actually have to touch the poop. I started to breathe again. I was happy that this wouldn't become a day in which I didn't participate in a group project. I'm not much of a farmer, but I figured I'd give it a try—after all, I didn't have a choice!

To begin the process of making the *abono*, the farmers measured and marked off a four by four foot square in the ground with sticks serving as the corners and our guide for retaining the shape and size. The base layer of the *abono* was tilled soil. Another layer consisted of chopped leaves and trunk of a chopped *guineo* (banana) tree. The leaves and trunks of the plant contain a lot of water, which flows throughout the structure to keep the fertilizer moist and nourish growing plants. We also used dried leaves of the *guineo* plant because, as the farmers informed us, the bacteria already decomposing the dead leaves would aid in breaking down all of the other fertilizer ingredients. Layer after layer was added to the *abono* in shovel scoops and dumped on from wheelbarrows. Tier by tier we spread the components and molded the large cube higher and higher. The leaves were mixed with the pig defecations (which were not gathered by me of course. I did however manage to overcome my disgust enough to spread the layer around with my shovel). We used *machetes* to chop up the *guineo* leaves and trunk, which I was frightened of because I don't

like knives unless I'm cooking as they're so extremely dangerous. I'm just saying, I would've fainted if I had gotten nicked by that *machete*, but I still participated in the chopping! Trying to be as careful as possible, I repeatedly jammed the machete into the *guineo* tree trunks, splattering water into the air and leaving behind messy chunks. The farmers explained the importance of utilizing all of our resources. If something fell off of the structure, we put it back on. We didn't waste any leaf, scoop of dirt or piece of poop.

The importance of organic farming in Rio Limpio goes beyond the healthiness of the food. It's recognizing the potential of all local natural resources to aid in the cultivation process and to avoid wasting. Even the remains of leftover fruits and vegetables are preserved to aid in the fertilization. An important lesson that I learned was that all natural elements have a purpose, and that something which one might regard as 'waste' may actually be valuable. When I didn't understand the significance of using the pig poop, the farmers explained that they could use any type of animal manure, but they took advantage of the fact that they already owned pigs; they didn't use any imported resources. The community is strengthened by its ability to reproduce using only the resources of the land. They export, but they don't need to import; they recycle what they already have.

If the lessons taught in Rio Limpio were applied to other aspects of life during this growing era of consumerist societies, where we are often dependent on the work of others to provide us with necessities, wasting incredible amounts of resources and energy, we might live in a more inventive and ecologically responsible community. But that may not happen fast enough. Our consumption habits are growing at a rate faster than our ability to preserve our natural resources. Even through growing up as a big consumer (I love shopping!), I have developed methods that can counter my dependency habits. It started in Rio Limpio when I realized that if farmers can reproduce food using poop they happen to have handy, I can scoop it up!



Mud: Nature's Answer to Duct Tape

By Kendra O'Connor: The George Washington University



When we were told that we would be building a new stove for the CREAR kitchen during our retreat in Rio Limpio, I pictured us with hammers, nails, and steel - not being covered head-to-toe in mud with my entire arm stuck inside a giant clay pot. However, this is exactly what my job entailed, and was the first of many assumptions to be shattered during the project.

The Lorena Stove is a Guatemalan alternative cook stove used in many Central American households. Its name comes from the Spanish *lodo* (mud) and *arena* (sand), the two materials used to build it. It uses wood to heat three separate open stove areas to cook food, and has a chimney to draw smoke out of the house, reducing required fuel costs and dramatically decreasing the health risks due to smoke pollution.

To build the stove, we and the CREAR students first had to demolish the original. After two days of hauling debris and being bit by ants, we were finally ready to hit the ground running with the Lorena assembly. Imagine, if you will, one single man in the foreground, carefully constructing the necessary cinderblock foundation for the stoves, while a flurry of CIEE and CREAR students run about in the background, digging dirt, sifting sand, churning cement, and mixing and/or flinging mud, all to be hauled in dilapidated wheelbarrows into the tiny, stifling hot kitchen.

We watched as Marcos (Resident Coordinator) and a small group of students (including myself) built the first of the three stoves, contorting ourselves into odd, uncomfortable shapes to seal joints between parts with mud. While some of us may have hummed and hawed at the pace of the project or the lack of constant tasks to keep us going, going, going, we soon learned that our multitasking methods would be obsolete.

Later in the day, after I was appointed the new *jefa* (boss) of the project, we decided to try building the second and third stoves at the same time. With commands in two different languages and globs of mud flying through the air, all the confusion and activity resulted in misplacement of parts, miscalculation of mud consistency, and mistakes that required additional time to fix.

We learned - the slightly harder and longer way - that the project was designed as a series of phases, including necessary downtime. This project, just like our service work in Santiago, requires a time for doing as well as a time for sitting, talking, listening, and watching. Without this, we would not have been able to fully appreciate exactly how the stove functions, the value of one man's careful mastery combined with 50 kids' hard labor, or how one can in fact find just about all the tools they need from the nature around them - even duct tape.



Ambiente en el Campo

P o v e r t y a n d H a p p i n e s s

By Lexa Panagore: Clark University



As middle class Americans, many of us assume that to live in poverty must mean to be unhappy and miserable because of the way they are living as a result of the poverty. However, when our group went to Rio Limpio, we found the opposite. Despite the isolated living situation (it took us about six hours to get there from Santiago), and extreme lack of money, many of the community members we interacted with were overjoyed about where they live, and I can't blame them because it is beautiful. I cannot say for sure if this happiness is only immediate, such as a smile or a laugh, or if it goes deeper and is always present.

Little kids would run up half naked to hold our hands and take pictures with us. The adults and students of CREAR were unbelievably positive about their environment and the way they live. Every farmer and student we met never complained about their laborious work in the fields and had an intense and inspiring sense of pride for their work and community. That sense of pride had clearly spread to the community outside of CREAR. It made me think that, although they are by definition living in poverty, they do not see it that way. This raises the question of how

rich and poor should be defined. Is rich only to have an abundance of money, while poor is only the opposite? Or is it possible to be rich in life, such as happiness and pride?

I would argue that Rio Limpio is a very rich community. Every morning community members wake up to a gorgeous view of mountains, miles of organic farmland and a clean river. Their food, because it is all organic, local, delicious and abundant, is never an issue. It is a self-sustaining community in which poverty, as the rest of the world sees it, is not the same. In fact, I think it's the opposite. It is an extremely rich community: rich in food, farming, hard work and delicious coffee.

Medio Ambiente

By Aysa Abraibesh: Clark University

We are completely enclosed by beautiful, lush, green mountains. Exotic birds chirp, a horse neighs in the distance, and *plátano* leaves sway in the wind. At night, I lie under the millions of stars and hear sounds of laughter and the shuffling of dominoes—the only indicators of human life in Río Limpio.

Loud, piercing noises of conchos honking, car engines, motorcycles, the smell of pollution, and the fast hustle and bustle of city life is all left behind here in the *campo*. Here I can hear myself think. I can take a breath and be present right now. In the city everyone is in a rush. In the *campo*, people are content to sit on their porches and play dominoes all day. The streets serve as garbage cans in the city. In Río Limpio (literally “Clean River”), the environment is treated with care and nurture. The people give back to the environment what the environment gives to them. That is what I love most about being in this *campo*.

I often find myself stressed out in the city, and many times it's for no reason. Sometimes I don't even realize how tense I am until I finally relax in my bed. It's not only the stress of school, homework, research, and everything I have to do, but it's the environment I am surrounded by. Each day when I walk home, even if I am not stressed, I tense up as I hear the sounds of conchos, cars, trucks, and *guaguas* all honking excessively non-stop. I hear the piercing engines of motorcycles, which are so loud they make nearby car alarms sound-off. I smell the car exhaust and start coughing as my contacts dry up. When I get home I breathe a sigh of relief, feeling as though I had been holding my breath.

I loved Río Limpio because of the fact that the environment is so calm and quiet. There are beautiful green trees and mountains everywhere and nature is truly alive. My experience in both Río Grande and Río Limpio, have made me realize that I am happier in the *campo* because of the relaxing environment. However, I have also learned that my mood does not only depend on the environment, it depends on me to bring that feeling of calm back to the city with me.

In Río Limpio the people influence their environment by keeping it clean and beautiful and from this care they are also influenced in that they live a calm, peaceful, happy life. I've learned to take this mentality back to Santiago with me and know that just as the environment influences me, I also influence it. So instead of thinking about what I need to do next and feeling stressed out, I have begun to live in the present and enjoy where I am right now. And as a result, I have brought my mood from the *campo* back to the city and I find myself feeling calm and happy amidst all the craziness and noisy confusion of life in the city.



Preview of the Santiago SL Blog: Rio Grande

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Rarely back home do we know where all of our food on our dinner plate comes from. But in our weekend stay in Rio Grande, we got a first hand experience of living off the land. With banana, plantain, cocoa trees, and yucca scattered throughout the community and surrounding land, these were the staples of our meals. In a variety of forms our dinner was as fresh as it could be. One dinner consisted of a scrumptious pile of a type of fresh-water crab, caught on the river banks the night before, which was an utter delicacy for myself.

But the real treat of the weekend was something near and dear to the heart of the community. Chocolate. I had the privilege of being a part of the entire process of making their version of hot chocolate from start to finish. The cocoa beans (in a coconut like shell and covered in white gew) are dried out, roasted, ground into an oozing molasses like gel, combined with spices and flour, smashed some more, and made into balls. The following morning the chocolate balls where grated and mixed with water, powdered milk and sugar, for a tasty hot cocoa.



Every resident we encountered had one thing to say about the chocolate. They made a fist, clenched their arm, and stated that their chocolate makes you strong, and was even the secret to why their residents live so long. When we were giving health charlas/lessons in the community, I/my group expected the community to be faced with many kinds of health problems, especially with their lack of access to any kind of healthcare. But to my surprise, we met many of the elderly in the community over 90 years old, and many telling us that they/their families very rarely got sick.

This certainly left me acknowledging the ethnocentric view I came to the community with, that this place was faced with real poverty. They could hardly ever starve with their sustainable diets based off the land, the lack of health problems was surprising, and even more so was the joy radiating from every person. But just because a lot of money does not exchange hands, are they poor?

- Jacob Taddy
University of Wisconsin, Madison



Alumni Updates!

By Chloe Stubber:
Warren Wilson College
Santiago, DR Fall 2009
Alumni

Service has always been a part of my life. It started out with community service related to my church and then shifted to a more meaningful experience when I was old enough to travel abroad. I experienced what the "third-world" looked like for the first time when I was 14 years old in Lesotho, a country in Sub-Saharan Africa, opening my eyes to life outside of the US. By the time I arrived at Warren Wilson College as a freshman, I was still unsure how to turn my passion for doing service into a college degree, or a career. I did however begin working with the Service-Learning Crew on campus and chose Social Work to be my major; I began patiently to find my niche in working towards social justice.

Finally I had the opportunity to live and learn in another country and although I explored many study abroad opportunities, CIEE's Service-Learning course in Santiago, Dominican Republic was the best suited for my personal and academic goals. I wanted to become fluent in Spanish. I wanted to take my experience and try it out in a different setting with a different culture, language and range of issues. I wanted my study abroad experience to be a real immersion experience that allowed me to be involved meaningfully in the community. During my tenure with the SL program, I was partnered up with Acción Callejera, an organization that works to end child labor through education. Most of the work is through remediation programs with the children who work and/or live on the streets. The children also inspired me in my research about how personal and social identities can be shaped through telling one's own story. To say that my study abroad experience was an understatement. My study abroad experience changed my perspective on many levels (even the idea and definitions of service!), increased my opportunities, and ultimately shaped my future.

Currently, I am finishing up my last semester as an undergraduate. I am interning with the Center for Participatory Change (CPC), a grassroots organization based in Western North Carolina and organizing for racial and economic justice in 25 counties. Through CPC I am involved with an immigrant rights advocacy project titled 100 Stories. Our current project focuses on a Guatemalan worker-owned cutting and sewing cooperative. We assist in grant-writing ventures and help build solidarity through an annual gathering of all CPC's partner organizations. The majority of CPC's partner organizations are based Latin America. I am able to apply many of the lessons that I learned abroad to my current line of work specifically my Spanish language skills. I appreciate the opportunities that I have had to expand my experiences, knowledge, and refine my skills in service. When reflecting back to when I was 14 on my first service trip to Lesotho to now a young woman soon to be graduate I am proud that my value and dedication to service have taught me so much.

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Highlights for the upcoming Santiago SL Newsletter:

- Announcements of the new Alumni-Intern Posts
- Updates on student field research and Capstone Projects

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