



Journey to Guatemala

BY SYLVIE WEIMAN '20

It was mid-January when a representative from an organization called Where There Be Dragons came to school to speak to the Human Rights class about social justice issues in Guatemala.

Through a stroke of luck, my Spanish class went to sit in on this lecture. I was immediately captivated by the speaker's passion for Guatemala, and when I found out that he would be leading a trip there during the summer, I was interested in trying to go. During the forty-five minute presentation, I caught a glimpse of the tragedies that have occurred in Guatemala and also the resilience of the Guatemalan people, and during the summer, I got to experience that resilience firsthand.

I traveled to Guatemala with Where There Be Dragons, an organization that leads trips all over the world for people of all ages. Dragons aims to teach participants independence, self-awareness, and

leadership, with an additional emphasis on global citizenship. Each trip of ten to twelve students and three instructors contains some of the same elements including home-stays, language study, and learning service, but each individual trip is unique. Each group visits different cities and stays in them for varying amounts of time. Because of the flexible itinerary, I had no idea what to expect before leaving on my adventure. I spent days traipsing from one outdoor equipment store to another, looking over a packing list that was specific and vague at the same time, but other than that, I didn't think much about the month to come. As my departure date drew closer, the trip still seemed like an abstract imagination.

Waving goodbye to my mom at the airport on June 28th, however, the experience became all too real. I realized for the first time that I would be leaving everything I knew behind for a new group of people and new a country. As my plane touched down in Miami where I would connect with the rest of my group, I took a deep breath, mentally preparing myself for awkward introductions and stilted conversation. Sadly, I had to take many more deep breaths before actually meeting people, as I got hopelessly lost in the Miami International Airport. When I finally met up with my group, I was happily surprised with how fast we bonded. The discomfort I had imagined was virtually non-existent, and our first interactions together set a positive tone for the rest of our time together.

By the time we arrived in Guatemala City, it was already dark outside. The air was warm on my face as I stepped through the

airport doors onto the crowded street. I immediately felt like an outsider as I saw many faces turn to stare at the group of Americans walking down the street. Although that feeling of being on the outside came over me many times while I was in Guatemala, there was one town where that sensation was so fleeting that I barely remember it.

We spent 10 out of 30 days living in homestays in San Juan La Laguna, a small town nestled between two volcanoes on the edge of magnificent Lake Atitlan. My homestay parents, Michaela and Domingo, were also the parents of seven grown children, some of whom lived in the same little grouping of houses with us. They had many grandchildren and even great grandchildren, and though I was introduced to all of them many times, I never could remember everyone's names. I spent my mornings in San Juan attending Spanish lessons, and my afternoons exploring the town and doing group bonding activities. When I first arrived in San Juan, I was surprised by how different it was from towns in the United States, but I soon became accustomed tuk-tuks whizzing by me in the street, the smell of fresh tortillas wafting through the air, and stray dogs brushing past my legs on the way to Spanish class. Looking back, I am amazed at how quickly San Juan became my home. My family in San Juan was extremely patient with me; because my Spanish speaking abilities were limited and Michaela and Domingo spoke the Mayan language, Tzutujil, most of the time, I learned valuable non-verbal communication skills. Although it was difficult for us to talk, I could see how much Michaela cared for me in the way she made my tea every morning and her amused smile when I tried to make tortillas. Our busy house was filled of warmth and love without anyone speaking a word.

One such wordless exchange happened on my penultimate night in San Juan. I retired to my room early, exhausted from planning the good-bye fiesta our group was hosting the next evening. I had been running around town all day, buying decorations and ingredients to make a meal for all the host families. As I was drifting off to sleep, I heard a knock on the door and then felt light penetrating

through my closed eyelids. I sat up in bed to see Michaela and her daughter-in-law, Maritza, bustling in, carrying a pile of clothes. After some gestures and a few sentences in Tzutujil that went right over my head, I finally understood that the clothes were for me to try on to see what I should wear to the fiesta. I picked up the blouse from the top of the pile, and was moved to see that it was a güipil, a traditional Mayan shirt. As Michaela and Maritza dressed me in the traditional Mayan outfit, I was overwhelmed with a sense of belonging. Having them fuss over my clothes and braid my hair made me feel as though I was truly part of their family. At the fiesta the next night, dressed in our borrowed finery, the other girls in my group and I danced and laughed with our homestay sisters and mothers, feeling truly accepted into the San Juan community.

Coming back to regular life at home was difficult, but the lessons I learned in Guatemala about myself and people help me see the world differently. My passion for learning languages is stronger than ever, but my confidence in communicating without words has also grown exponentially. Knowing how it feels to be accepted so completely into a new community encourages me daily to strive to make our school a place where people can feel that same sense of belonging.

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Sylvie with her homestay sister, Miki, on her first day in San Juan.



Fiesta Night for Sylvie's group members: Anat, Meg, Sylvie, and Lucia