

Trip Report- May 3-10, 2023
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Wednesday May 3, 2023

TRAVEL DAY! Well I guess technically my travel started yesterday when I left for Chicago. But I headed to the airport this morning at 3:30am to meet Anne and Roxanne during my layover in Miami.

We landed in Guatemala City with plenty of time to grab lunch and chat before heading to the TAG counter for check-in. This is where the adventure really began. TAG recently increased their checked baggage prices from \$1 per pound to \$3 per pound. The counter attendant was very patient with Anne, who quite reasonably was a bit miffed at this sudden price increase, but he was not very helpful nor could he give any real explanation behind the 200% increase. To make matters worse, this attendant then found us at the gate because he forgot to charge us the initial \$20 for one bag.

The final flight of the day was a quick hour. Mayra was ready and waiting for us at the airport in Flores to drive us to the campus and we prepared for the week ahead of us.

Thursday May 4, 2023

I spent my morning with Roxanne, taking pictures of the students working in their classrooms and helping with the postcard project for sponsors. It seemed like most of the kids enjoyed the activity. Between the examples Roxanne showed them, the power of Google Translate, and some very basic Spanish on my part they seemed to catch on. It was interesting to see which kids copied the example design and which ones let creativity rule.

In the afternoon, I sat in on a meeting with Anne and the Cervical Cancer team (Mayra, Carmen, Sandra, and Bianey) where they talked about the program and I mostly listened.

We learned that there is an organization in Guatemala that is performing electro-cautery on women, but not performing any paps or other treatment options. It seemed to me that it was a see and treat type situation, but no one was following up or actually making sure the treatment was necessary. Perhaps Anne will have more information in her report as my Spanish skills can only get me so far.

Roxanne and I met with the teachers to plan activities and have a general discussion about the week (Tikal, Mother's Day, Lunch and Learn, etc). This is where I learned that all of the teachers were coming with us to Tikal on Sunday. I had thought that it would only be me, Roxanne, Seiner, and Emerson managing 50 kids. I think my face expressed my relief more than I could say with my Spanish and this might have been the best part of the entire trip!

It was all well and good until Anne came in while Roxanne and I were working in the community room where she informed me that I would be joining them on the jornada Friday.... the van would be leaving at 4 am. If you know anything about me, you know that mornings are not my forte.

Surprises from the day:

One thing that surprised me was the number of students, primarily in Kindergarten and 1st grade, who were still unable to write their names. I kind of anticipated that being an issue in Kindergarten, but thought that there would be more who could spell at least their first name. Many students, across all the classes, had to take off their name tags when asked to include all of their names (all four or five) in order to spell them correctly.

A good surprise was when Oliver, one of the 3rd graders, started to read the postcard in English! He did such a great job working through it and laughed at me when I told him how we pronounce the “j.” There are several students who are learning English, beyond that which Seiner and the other teachers are teaching in class. They are quite proud to show off their skills and are very patient with my Spanish skills, and lack thereof.

Friday, May 5, 2023

I snuck out of the room so as not to disturb Roxanne at o-dark early. Mayra drove us (Anne, Andres, Leslie, Sandra, Bianey, and myself) to San Luis in the microbus, on wonderfully smooth paved roads. It was about 2 hours from SewHope to the clinic there. We unloaded the microbus, loaded everything back into trucks and an ambulance (really just a pickup truck with a shell on the back and bed), and then continued to drive an additional 2 hours on winding, gravel roads. I was in the back with Mayra and Leslie, Carmen’s daughter, and we just bounced around for the two hours. By the time we made it to La Pimienta, the village we were working in for the day, I was ready to be out of the truck.

The clinic was set up in a school, which looked like it had not been in use for some time. A thick layer of dust covered the desks and chairs and the workbooks in the classroom were blank. Windows were broken and made “secure” with a single strand of barbed wire. I sat outside of the room Anne was working out of and helped input the patient data into the spreadsheet. It was good numbers practice for me. A majority of the patients who came did not speak Spanish but the indigenous language of Q’eqchi so Sandra and a local social worker would work together to get the correct information. Most people didn’t know their age, which I guess is one of those cultural differences between Westernized civilizations and Guatemala that I didn’t expect. I was amazed by all the beautifully woven shawls and the intricate stitched patterns on skirts! So many colors!

Despite spending the day in the shade, my face ended up pretty sunburnt. Between the reflection from the computer screen and the intensity of the sun here, I should have known better and put on sunscreen. Two lessons learned on this *jornada*: 1. Sunscreen! and 2. Always carry tissues or something similar as you never know what the bathroom situation will be (luckily I had kleenex in my backpack... this time).

We finally arrived back at SewHope around 8:30pm and had dinner together. Roxanne was already in bed by then. I crashed pretty soon after getting back to the room

Saturday May 6, 2023

I slept in! Okay, so it was still like 6 am when I got up, but compared to yesterday it felt so nice! I took it pretty easy. I did a few hours of work on my computer, started to look ahead at my school work for my next class, read a bit of my book, but overall just relaxed and mentally prepared myself for Sunday and a trip to Tikal.

Roxanne and I zoomed with Cecilia to do a test-run of the Lunch and Learn. It went pretty well and we worked through the dead zones of the wifi connection. Hopefully my phone will be able to smoothly jump nets as needed to keep the signal strong on Tuesday for the real deal.

We got ice cream this evening! Roxanne had been working so hard on emailing the student photos to their sponsors that when Anne came to ask if we wanted to come get ice cream with her, Mayra, and Sandra, she literally dropped everything she was doing. Her reaction was pretty amazing!

Sunday May 7, 2023

Tikal Day! We started our day waiting for the bus. It was supposed to arrive at 7am but in true Guatemalan fashion, it arrived at 8:20. All the kids (there ended up being 63 of them) were loaded up and the teachers filed on the bus, a quick look at the full seats and it was clear that this bus was not large enough for all of us. So a few lucky students, Sophia, Roxanne and myself filed off the bus and into the microbus (with air conditioning), to follow behind the bus on our way to Tikal.

Along the way, Emerson, our chauffeur, tour guide and Mayra's husband, was talking to me about the flora we passed. The white flowers that hang from many trees are edible. They are sweet and often served with eggs. He told me he used to bring home flowers for Mayra and by the next meal they would be gone because she had made dinner with them hahaha. That is why he doesn't bring her flowers anymore! It was a nice drive up to the park entrance, about 90 minutes or so, where we got our passports checked and our tickets to show at the next checkpoint. We then drove another 30 minutes up to the parking lot, driving slowly and with windows down to hear the sounds of the rainforest around us. While I didn't see any jaguars, I saw one monkey swinging through the canopy as we made our way along the road.

Fun story: Emerson pointed out some special trees, just for me. The locals refer to them as "tourists." These trees start off with a white bark, but over time with all of the sun exposure, the bark turns a bright red. Now at this point I'm laughing and he's laughing (probably a little bit at me haha) because my face is still pretty red from the recent sun exposure.

We finally made it to the ticket booth and Roxanne and I got a souvenir stamp in our passports! Then the long day really began. It was very hot (96 degrees) and sunny, but I brought sunscreen with me this time and reapplied often, even if I sweated most of it off. We hiked up the path and took a quick snack break. Most of the kids had brought lunches/snacks with them. Emerson led us up the shady path, which wound across tree roots and up "stairs" until we reached Temple IV, the tallest temple at Tikal. Another snack and bathroom break and then we were climbing the

65m up to the top. The view was spectacular! Did you know that is where they filmed a rebel base in Episode IV of Star Wars? Several of the students were quite fearless, proceeding to climb as high as they could. There was no railing at the top and a pretty sheer drop into the jungle. It had me nervous and some of the students lost their nerve once they climbed the stairs and saw the view. One boy, Nilmar, quickly scabbled to the top of the temple steps, as high as he could go and stood triumphantly with his arms in the air. He was clearly among the bravest of the students.

Once we descended the stairs, we continued to weave through the rainforest path to the “lost world” and the Grand Plaza. Most of the students climbed up another temple on an even narrower stairway and up to small viewing platform. I stayed down below (heights and I aren’t the best of friends) and chatted with some students who also didn’t want to climb up. They spent time playing the equivalent of “Concentration”, the hand-clapping game. Roxanne also stayed down and was chatting up some French-Italian tourists from Germany. She told them all about SewHope and gave them a card so they could look us up later and learn more! Roxanne is so passionate about SewHope and it’s quite infectious, so only a heartless person would dare refuse a card from her.

Once we made it to the Great Plaza, what Roxanne and I thought was the final stop before lunch, there were photographers hovering all over the place, just waiting to take your picture and make you pay for it. Surprisingly, a lot of the kids paid these men to take their photos, with me, with Roxanne, with the teachers! Really, I think they were all very excited to be in Tikal and couldn’t wait to have a souvenir to show their families. Anyway, the Great Plaza is the central compound of this Mayan city. It housed 2 temples (The Temple of the Jaguar and the Temple of Masks), a ball court, and the living quarters for the priestesses who led ceremonies. There was a lot to see in this one spot! Emerson was the star of the show, constantly swarmed by students wanting to learn more about various aspects of the plaza and taking notes in their notebooks. We were very lucky to have him!

Finishing up the temple tours, we headed back towards the bus and to lunch... or so we thought. Across from the ticket booth and between our group and the parking lot was a gift shop. All of the students stopped to look through the keychains, sculptures, paintings, carvings, etc so it took a while to get passed it. Then just as Roxanne and I were ready to collapse into the van straight ahead of us, Seiner led the group to the right into a museum. I was just about ready to cry. Luckily, it was a pretty small museum so it didn’t take very long to walk through, but when you are ready to sit down in the air conditioning and head to lunch, it almost breaks your heart to make another stop. Mind you, we thought we would have lunch between 1 and 1:30 and be back at SewHope by 3 or 4, and it was 3:30 at this point.

We finally got everyone on the buses and headed down to the main entrance for lunch. The microbus crew were all zonked out by the time we made it to the restaurant. It took a bit of coaxing to wake one of the little girls up, hahaha! But the restaurant had an amazing spread prepared for us: chicken, rice, vegetables, mushroom sauce, and tortillas, or course, and cool horchata on the tables. Some kids didn’t finish their chicken so ran back to the bus to grab their

snack containers from earlier to take the chicken and leftovers home for dinner. Antsy, misbehaving kids signaled that it was to wrap up the day and head back to Santa Ana. The drive back was quiet, but many students fell asleep this time. I read a book and chatted a bit with Emerson and Roxanne, but we were all ready to be done.

When we finally got back to SewHope, it was nearly 7pm. Unfortunately, there was an accident involving a tour bus (driven by an unlicensed driver) and one of the program mothers (also driving without a license, but she was on an ATV). No one was seriously injured, praise be, but it was not the best way to end a day of fun in the sun. The police also responded very quickly, which surprised me, but Anne checked on the woman and made sure she was okay, or as okay as you can be after being clipped by a tour bus.

Monday, May 8, 2023

It was a quiet morning. Roxanne and I didn't realize that the students were not coming today. I worked on my computer and caught up on emails in the morning and got some photos of the women waiting to see Anne. But that afternoon, there was a huge Mother's Day celebration with more than 100 mothers coming to participate in the festivities. The teachers put together an amazing program with a Miss Mama Contest, mini games, and prizes to show these women how much we appreciate them. The Miss Mama Contest was quite something. These women were judged by Seiner and the second place winner of the local Beauty Pageant. They did things like dance and give speeches, as you might expect, but they also were judged on their ability to make the most beautiful salad in 10 minutes. I didn't know quite what to expect from this celebration, but a salad making contest was not even in my realm of possibilities!

The minigames were very entertaining. One involved drinking a can of coke, eating a bag of chips, and a package of sweets as fast as possible to show that you were an excellent multitasker. Another involved being the first to show Rosselyn (our reinforcement teacher) a picture of your child. There were a few women tripping over themselves trying to race to the front, I'm still not totally sure who got there first. But I think the best game, and I'm sure Anne would agree with me, was the bottle feeding. Two teams of two competed against each other to be the first to feed their "baby" a baby bottle of coke. One woman took the role of mother and the other the baby. One of the teams had it all figured out and really went full-send. There was a lot of laughing throughout the crowd. While it may seem frivolous and extravagant to host a party, these women are the keystone of their families. They are all so grateful for SewHope and the support we give them and their children. For these 100 or so mothers, an afternoon of thoroughly entertaining frivolity and a meal they didn't have to prepare or pay for is well deserved.

Tuesday, May 9, 2023

Roxanne spent the morning finishing up the postcard project with the handful of students who missed the project last week. I joined some of the kids in the watermelon garden and got pictures of them working with Marcelo to harvest the ripe fruits and then they all got to taste the fruits of their labor after. They were all very excited to be out there helping. Every student got to take a watermelon home and the rest will be used for snacks and lunches this week.

The Lunch and Learn was held in the late morning. Roxanne did a great job talking about the school and progress being made. I filmed it on my phone which worked well until the kids were ready to sing the song they had been practicing all morning. That is when the drain of running Zoom combined with 96 degrees sent my phone into a panic and it shut down. Luckily, Roxanne recorded the song on her phone so I was able to stitch the recordings together for Cecilia to share with everyone later.

The rest of the afternoon I spent taking pictures and working on other things on my laptop. I took a few minutes to pack my bags, since we were planning to leave around 6 to catch a flight to Guatemala City. Roxanne and Seiner were meeting in the community room, which was getting pretty hot in the afternoon heat and humidity, so I brought over the fan from our room and joined them at the table. I chimed in every once in a while but spent most of the time working on other tasks.

With my bags packed and the room cleaned up, it was time to load up the van and head to Flores. Julio, Mayra's son, loaded up most of the luggage and Emerson drove us to the airport. Mayra was taking an exam for her class. The trip to Guatemala City was uneventful and it felt like we waited just about as long for the car to take us to the hostel as we were in the air.

I was pleasantly surprised by the hostel. The gentleman who ran the place was very polite and he even tried to take Anne's massive bag up the stairs to the room. That bag was as big, if not bigger than, he was so she convinced him to just let her leave it downstairs. Our room had five single beds and a bathroom, no extras or fancy treats but more than enough for the 6 hours we would be there.

Wednesday, May 10, 2023

Between the anticipation of returning home and the rooster who felt like singing his song all night, I didn't sleep much. We left for the airport around 4 am. Our hostel host was awake and helped carry bags out to the curb for our chauffeur to load into his car. Smooth sailing for travels and we made it through all controls and customs without issue. My layover in Dallas was longer than Roxanne and Anne's so after we had lunch I left them at their gate to take the Skyrail over to my departure terminal. I had the gate to myself for a while and picked at some projects before I got on the plane around 2:40pm.

I had the middle seat, but it wasn't awful. My seat buddies were both around my age and for the first hour or so of the flight we were all reading books. I'm sure we looked like quite the millennial/Gen Z trio. I dozed for a bit on and off for the rest of the flight but middle seat naps are not easy.

Just when I thought my travel day was over, I joined my parents to drive back from Chicago to LaPorte during peak Chicago rush hour. The 90 minute trip dragged out to 2 hours but my father took pity on both my mother and I and we took an earlier exit to stop at Panera Bread for dinner and stretch our legs. I don't know who was more ready to be out of the car, my mother or me! I

finally ended my travel day with a wonderful shower (with hot water and plenty of water pressure) and then slept hard until about 9 am the next morning.

Bonus travel: I foolishly scheduled a house showing for 10 am Friday morning, which meant I had two choices for the final 3 hours of my travel time: leave really early Friday morning and go directly to the showing or leave Thursday afternoon and have a few hours of peace before restarting my chaotic life schedule. I opted for the latter and officially ended my travel hours at 5:30 pm EST on Thursday.

Overall Thoughts:

Even though it was a very quick trip, I felt like a lot was accomplished. There were a few things that I didn't have time to talk to Mayra about or things that I suddenly remembered after we had left, but nothing an email couldn't fix.

I hated how hot it was, but I can't control the weather.

I wish my Spanish was better. Meetings took so long with Google Translate in the mix and even then I feel like we lose a lot in the translation. Communication was not always clear, especially when it comes to scheduling things. A goal for myself is to take more time to learn the language and increase my fluency. I wonder how much I can improve in a year if I set aside the time to learn and to practice?

With the loss of Elder, who is capable of taking over the Public Health projects? If our mission is truly to end the injustices of poverty, we need someone who understands the needs of the community, connects with key stakeholders, innovates new and relevant initiatives, and is capable of following the directions of SewHope leadership. Marcelo does a great job with the maintenance of the campus and cultivation of the crops, but he doesn't give me the impression that he would excel beyond that. He was very good with the kids when working with them in the garden, maybe he could take on a bigger role with a more formalized agricultural/education program.

We have a lot of KCAH food left in storage and it will all expire in November 2024. Can we estimate how much we need to feed the students and set that aside for the education program and develop a plan to distribute the rest of the food? Maybe Mayra, Bianey, and Sandra can take some with them on *jornadas* to distribute? Maybe we have connections throughout the region that we can reach out to and provide their communities with KCAH? All of this needs to be planned more fully, but we have the resources to make an immediate, if short, impact against hunger and malnutrition in Guatemala.

There are several additional items that would be useful:

- at least 15 more chromebooks - so that every student in the school has access to one (even if they use them all at the same time)
- Chairs- several of the plastic seats were cracking or shattering. Maybe there are more substantive seating options at MESA in Fostoria that would work better and last longer.

- Computer carts- so that the Chromebooks can be charged and stored easily. Right now they are stored over in the clinic area and carried to the school every morning
- Potentially lab equipment for the cytology lab/school