

Developing a Sustainable Community in Los Andes, Guatemala

College Park Scholars Academic Showcase , May 4, 2012

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To complete my Global Public Health fieldwork, I traveled to Guatemala through the Alternative Break program at the University of Maryland. During this trip, a group of fourteen of us stayed at the Los Andes Nature Reserve and assisted the local community with repainting the elementary school. Our goal was to repaint the interior and hopefully repaint the mural outside the school if we had enough time. Not only did we help repaint the school, but we also learned all about the people of the local community and how they were successful in keeping their community sustainable.

How is Los Andes Sustainable?

The Los Andes people took various steps into making their community successfully sustainable. Each day we spent on the reserve we learned about the different ways the community stay sustainable. For example, the reserve...

- Ran on hydroelectricity, using energy from a river that ran through
- Built a local shop that provided everyday needs to the people
- Organized a carpool system so people could travel to the city together
- Established a Health Center to meet the medical needs of the people

What were the challenges I faced?

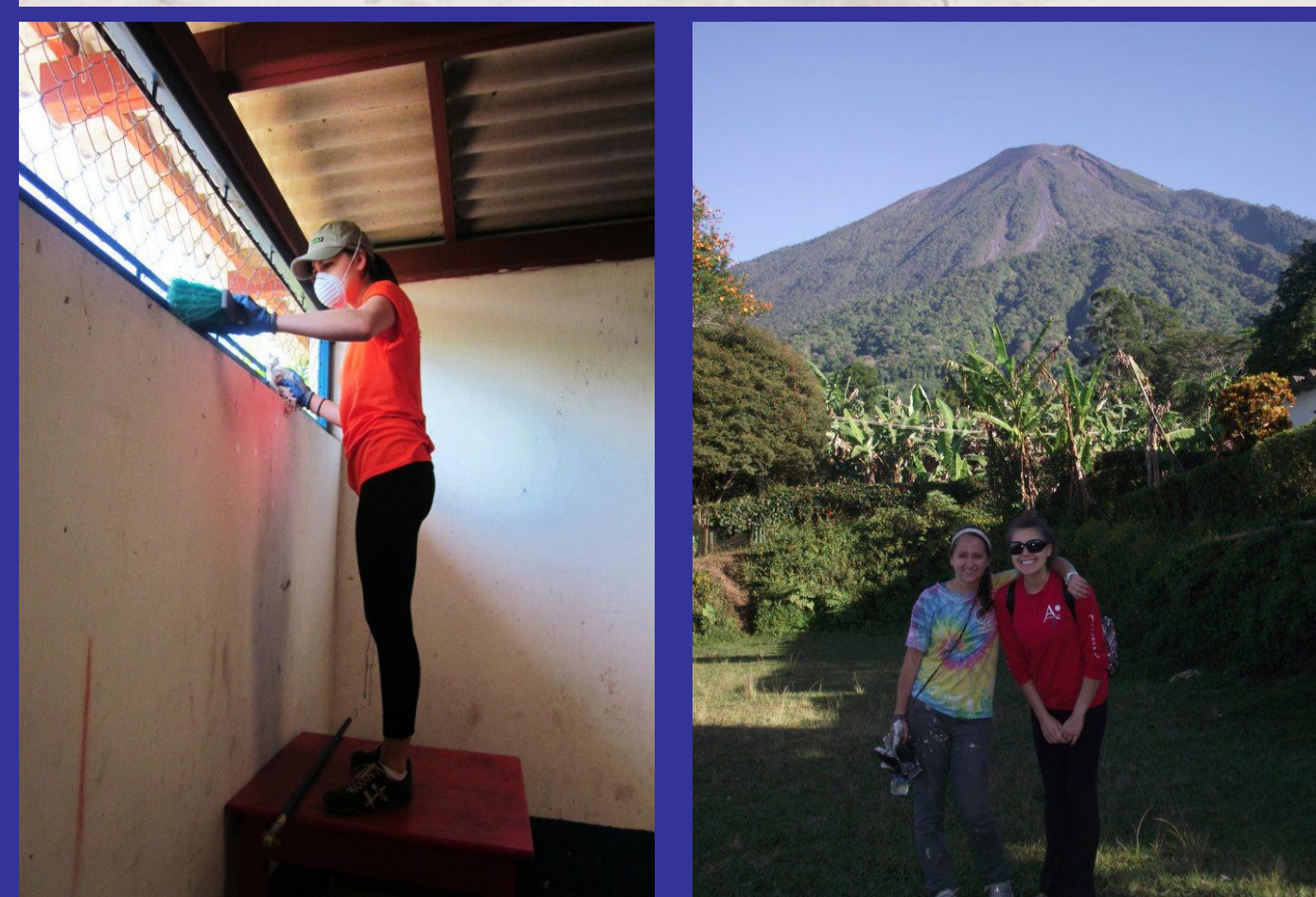
Although I loved every second of being on the reserve in Los Andes, there were times when I was frustrated or felt unsure. Here are some reason's why...

- I was outside my comfort zone
- I could not properly navigate (I like knowing where I am)
- The language barrier (everyone spoke strictly Spanish)
- There are so many improvements that could be made in Guatemala in general, but I realized there is no way to tackle them all
- Waking up at 6am everyday (this was probably the biggest challenge)



The house we were lucky enough to stay in

Although our trip was heavily focused on community service and helping the Los Andes community school, we also were actively engaged in learning so much about the community and sustainable development. During the bulk of the day, my role at the reserve was to listen to the five students' directions on how to help with the school. Most of my tasks involved dusting, scraping paint, and then repainting the walls and ceiling. After we completed our community service tasks of the day, my new role at the nature reserve was to listen and learn. I learned so much from the different people in Los Andes who were in charge of various groups. For example, the nurse from the local health clinic taught us about how the clinic ran. The president of the Student Government Association (SGA) also talked to us about the projects the students do to help the people on the reserve.



Acknowledgements:

I would like to thank all those involved in the Alternative Break Program at the University of Maryland for making this trip possible. I would also like to especially thank Judy Martinez for being our staff trip leader and assisting me throughout my experience. I would like to thank the other students who

Last but not least, I would like to thank Greg Raspanti for being my practicum mentor and Dr. Donna Howard, Dr. Colleen Farmer, and Dr. Muhiuddin Haider.



What Public Health Issues were addressed?

Public health issues were a huge part of the trip—even more than I expected. Each day public health was somehow incorporated into what we were learning. Some of the issues include...

- Education—the community was really striving to improve their system and get students actively involved in learning
- Disease prevention—the health clinic supplied information on how to prevent STDs and pregnancy, when to get vaccinated, and how to live nutritiously.
- Sustainability—the community took plenty of measure to be sustainable and environmentally friendly.

My Experience

Traveling to Guatemala was the single most amazing experience in my life. I learned so much from the members of the Los Andes Nature Reserve community. Each one of the locals had something to offer the community and were so hardworking and determined. I learned one does not need to have expensive “things” to be happy. I think all Americans, including me, could learn how to appreciate the little things in life (family, friends, etc...) and not the material “things,” which in the grand scheme of things do not really mean much. I also learned that because every community has different resources, the people of the different communities need to find the best way for them to live—no way is the “right” way. In the US, we have a lot of people that need to be provided for. So, we need more technologies and to be more efficient. But, in Los Andes, they can find ways to depend on each other for all the communities' needs.

