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ENG105 Personal Narrative

I never considered myself to be claustrophobic until I found myself crammed into the only bathroom available to us. The heat already had me on edge as I awkwardly attempted to go to the bathroom quickly, I looked around for something to distract me when my eyes met with another beadier pair. This was one of the many situations that pushed me out of my comfort zone during my service trip to the Dominican Republic. This specific moment took place at our work site; a small Haitian community named Naranjo, where we did most of our volunteer work. While working in the village was one of the many eye-opening experiences that made me realize the privilege I had as an American.

I landed in the city of Santo Domingo in July of 2018. Immediately upon arrival, I noticed three key differences between the DR and Pittsburgh. The first was the humid wave of heat that greeted me as soon as I stepped off the boarding bridge of our plane. The second was the sound, as we drove through the city towards our home base I rolled down the window of the Guagua just to listen to the tapestry of sound woven by the 3,458,000 residents of Santo Domingo. The third was the difference between Spanish spoken by Dominicans then the Spanish I had learned in my Mexican household. I found it difficult to keep up with our local friends as the Spanish they spoke was much faster, and many of the terms they used were slang that was exclusive to the DR.

The most prominent difference overall was the living conditions that were just a part of the daily lives of the people of Naranjo. In the community of Naranjo, amenities that I had

commonly overlooked in my life such as running water, electricity, and even clothing were luxuries many of the community could not afford. It was a heartbreaking story of a group of people completely overlooked not only by the government but by most of Dominican society who saw them as outsiders. The goal of our trip was to help create a future for the children of Naranjo by building a preschool and running a day camp where we taught them English. During our workdays, we got to choose which project we wanted and as I am not very fond of children, I would usually work in the preschool using a pickaxe and shovel to dig a foundation for the floor, applying a concrete mixture to the walls, and digging a 10-meter trench and filling it with concrete as a foundation for the front wall of the preschool. This work gave me an odd sense of familiarity as it reminded me of working alongside my father back at home for his contracting business. My leaders noticed that I never signed up to work the daycare and to push me out of my comfort zone they pushed me to try it out, which ultimately ended up being one of my favorite experiences of the trip.

On the first day I worked at the daycare, I was paired with a fellow volunteer, a girl from Montana Ellie. The children immediately gravitated towards Ellie because of her vibrant personality leaving me on the sidelines until we got to our main exercise. We took turns drawing images on a chalkboard and then having the children point each one out in Spanish as we explained the English translation to me. As soon as I stepped up to the chalkboard and pronounced the first word in Spanish, I turned around to a sea of excited eyes staring directly at me. They all barraged me with a flurry of questions asking me where I learned how to speak Spanish, why it sounded different than the Spanish they spoke, and why I didn't look like them and was able to speak fluent Spanish. I explained to them how although I was American my father was Mexican and taught me how to speak Spanish throughout my childhood. After that, I

spent the entire workday getting to know the children and figured out why I was uninterested in working with them. It was not because I did not like children but because I was scared that I would get attached to them. By the end of my trip, I had spent much of my time working with the children and although I was sad to leave them, I was happy that I had left a positive impact on their lives.

Looking back, I still find it difficult to understand my impact on the community of Naranjo. Although I undoubtedly left a positive impact on the community there were many times when I felt guilty and as if we were exploiting them as it also benefited me with community service hours and a trip to a foreign country. After enough reflection, I was able to realize that the most important takeaway from my trip was an actual understanding of the privilege I had and how to use it to help others.