

March 10, 2019

Good morning everyone,

This morning it is my pleasure to talk to you all about my mission trip to Guatemala. It's hard for me to talk about this trip because one, I miss when I wasn't in -16 degrees weather, two I miss the people and three because it is one of those experiences that you simply cannot put into words. I feel that no matter what I say today, it could never truly do justice to this trip. Some of the problems Guatemala is currently facing include pollution, water supply, crime, education and poverty. Behind Haiti, Guatemala comes in as the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere. It took me actually being in the Guatemalan airport for it to set in that my experience was about to begin. Just being in their airport you can see the difference in culture and what their people are accustomed to, in the airport you find guards, but not just guards, these are army men with rifles. Traveling through the city on a day to day basis we were always passing the army, multiple units of police, and sometimes even getting stopped by police. These travels then brought us to the community where we were helping.

This small village is named "Anibal Archila," and if you're wondering what this means, the citizens named this village after a Guatemalan reporter who died as he was reporting the eruption of the Pacaya volcano. This same eruption is the reason many of the Guatemalans have found themselves living in this village. Their homes were previously in the path of the lava flow and were destroyed so the government gave them this land, but did not give them much else. They gave them small empty homes, and stacks of bricks to build roads despite the fact that the villagers did not know how to do this. This was the government doing its part and nothing further was done, they abandoned the community and left them to fend for themselves. The community has done very well for themselves as they are very resourceful, and also with the help of the mission teams that go and help. I did not know what to expect going into their community in terms of how the community members would react to us and even how I would react to them. I know the one thing I was very scared for was the language barrier; I was terrified that I wouldn't be able to form a connection with the people or the kids because we didn't speak the same language. I soon learned that all we needed to communicate was a smile. Upon our first visit to the village they had a welcome for us like no other. As soon as we turned the corner to the main road that lead to the village there was a whole party waiting for us. There were two posters held by four little girls that read, "God Bless you all, thank you for your help," while the other said, "Welcome to la Archila we are glad to have you here." The whole community was so welcoming and showed so much enthusiasm for our presence, they had music playing for us, fireworks going off, treats for us and everyone was out of their houses waving at us. I kid you not, in less than five minutes I had a child on my back, and people were already playing games with the children. Their eyes were wide open with excitement and in just an instant we had already established a connection.

Getting to work we had three tasks at hand; building the road and sidewalks, painting the houses, and a kid crew that was dedicated to occupying the kids so that they didn't get into the paint. At first glance, I thought why does the community need this, aren't there more pressing issues that need to be taken care of? However, this is what they need at the moment. Having a road that is paved is important as with no loose dust the adults and children have less health issues and also for the happiness of the children who now can easily play outside. As for painting their houses, it is so that the villagers can take pride in their homes, just like we would like our houses and neighborhoods to be beautiful, they do too. Personally, I was on the road crew and I was laying down bricks and pounding

them in. The two men pictured here go by the names of Julio and Minor. These two brothers have a construction background and are in charge of the building of the road. They work so hard all year round in this community and if you can see they both have holes in their shirts and their work shoes are practically torn to shreds. These men are struggling themselves; however, you still find them in this community working the hardest they can to help these people while they are also in need of help. I continuously replay in my mind the laughs of Julio and Minor that are so pure, their laughs show you their honest and loving character. Throughout the trip I grew to have so much respect for them.

Although the first day was filled with a lot of happiness, it was also filled with a lot of struggle and frustration. We actually ended up slowing Julio and Minor down that day because we constantly needed their advice and for them to approve of our line of bricks as we could only lay them line by line. They would come over and stare at our lines, probably feeling bad that they were continuously telling us that they weren't good. It was always, this brick is too high or too low, these two bricks have too much space between them, or this brick isn't far down enough. It was interesting to see how much went into consideration for the construction of these roads. It was also hard to imagine that here we were a group of about 15 of us working on this road complaining about how taxing it was when a lot of the time Julio and Minor work by themselves. It was simple reality checks like this one that you would have every day.

Luckily, when the next day came and we went back to the community, we had gotten the hang of laying the bricks down and were moving much faster. The most amazing part was the community was not willing to stand and watch us work, everyone wanted to help! Some days we would form what I like to call a brick conga line and we'd line up from the top of the road where there was a huge pile of bricks and transport them to the road where we were working by catching them and throwing them to the next person. We had work gloves, but these community members would non-hesitantly join the lines and catch and throw these same bricks with their bare hands. I remember sometimes the brick tossing wouldn't go so well and I think one of the Spanish words everyone learned very quickly was, "alto," the Spanish word for stop. As we would be working on the roads, community members would randomly come out of their houses with a tray of watermelon for us, but it didn't end there, they'd come back out with another tray even though everyone had already had some. Then they'd come back seconds later with another tray that was piled even higher. Still, the children remain the most amazing sight to see. The children would come to the roads and you'd see three or four of them struggling to push a wheelbarrow full of sand that even I could barely push. They'd also do their best to carry bricks to us as we needed them. As I said before I was scared to not be able to connect with the children because of the language barrier, but it was not an issue whatsoever. I think the furthest our conversations went were me asking them their names, and how old they were. This was true for everyone on this trip, but as you will see, the bonds we formed with these children were so strong. I personally got very close with a pair of twin girls by the name of Estefania and Fernanda who were three years old. Every day when we arrived you could find the children waiting for us at the bottom of the road and when we were leaving you could find them hanging on to the bus wanting to come with us. The first time, we got all the way to the top of the hill before realizing Amiga Nancy, the troublemaker of the group, had been hanging onto the bus the whole time. From that day forward we made sure to inspect the bus for any children. But, it's really the happiness of these kids that is like no other, they are wearing the same dirty clothes with holes in them every day, but you cannot look at them and not see a smile on their face. All they want to do is laugh and play it made it so hard to say goodbye to them on the last day.

Here is a time lapse of our work on the road on the last day. I have to admit I got very emotional on this day leaving the road unfinished at only three quarters done. I thought to myself why is it that in Canada we could have a road of this length paved in less than a few days, but, since we couldn't finish the road who knows how long Julio and Minor will be slaving to finish it themselves. Then they'll move onto the next road that needs to be paved and the next. It honestly felt like we hadn't accomplished anything and hadn't truly helped, I soon realized this wasn't the case though. The instant we stopped working on the road, a family rushed out of their house with a soccer ball and started a family game of soccer. It may be something small, but it's something that they weren't able to do before. The villagers then hosted a goodbye ceremony for us where we danced, were introduced to their carnival traditions, were presented with gifts and they fed us. It was somewhat difficult for all of us as we sat and the villagers watched us eat. The goodbyes were even harder, knowing that it was unlikely for me to see these amazing people and children ever again.

I learned so much from this trip and I think we have a lot to learn from third world countries. When people hear this label, I feel that we simply picture starving children and broken-down houses, but there is so much more to them than that. You need to see how beautiful this country is, there is not one stretch of land that you can travel without seeing beautiful mountains. There are so many volcanoes and then you see these wonderful ecosystems. Not only is the country beautiful, but so are the people. In these countries the laughs and smiles of the children are louder and wider than ever and the sense of community is so strong. We as Christians can learn so much from them. Just as they uplift one another in their hardships, we need to follow in this example. We have so much, yet give so little and here are these people who have barely enough to get by, but they are so willing to give. Each day is a struggle for them to get food to provide for their children, but these are the same people who will give you trays and trays of watermelon, and will cook chicken, rice and tortillas for a group of 30 people and then sit and watch them eat. As Christians we are always taught to help the needy and pray for the less fortunate, but it is much more different when you can put names and faces to these people. This trip has changed my life, I can't help but wonder each day how Estefania and Fernanda are, what Donya Rosa is doing or if Canché is okay? Little by little we have to touch every area of the Earth because this is one small community in Guatemala which in itself has thousands of communities like this, then you move to South America as a whole and there's even more and then the millions of communities when you put every country and continent together. It is our little touches that make all the difference. To conclude I would like to read the ending of a prayer written by Archbishop Oscar Romeo. It says,

This is what we are about.

We plant the seeds that one day will grow.

We water seeds already planted, knowing that they hold future promise.

We lay foundations that will need further development.

We provide yeast that produces far beyond our capabilities.

We cannot do everything, and there is a sense of liberation in realizing that.

This enables us to do something, and to do it very well.

It may be incomplete, but it is a beginning, a step along the way,  
an opportunity for the Lord's grace to enter and do the rest.

We may never see the end results,

but that is the difference between the master builder and the worker.

We are workers, not master builders; ministers, not messiahs.  
We are prophets of a future not our own.  
Amen.