



¡Pura Vida, Mae! Peace Corps, Youth Development, and Costa Rica

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La Victoria, Costa Rica

The population of Costa Rica is approx. 4.8 million. The population of La Victoria, the community where I was stationed for two years, is approx. 1,500. La Victoria is located in northeast Costa Rica, has acres upon acres of Dole banana plantations, and has a hot and humid climate.

Challenges Facing Youth in Costa Rica

According to the most recent Costa Rican census, 19% of families in urban areas are living in poverty and 5.2% are in extreme poverty, while in rural areas (like La Victoria) 30.3% are below the poverty line and 10.6% are in extreme poverty. The high school drop out rate is extremely high with only about 1 in 3 students graduating. As a result of poverty and an education system that has a lot of room for growth, teen pregnancy, drug and alcohol use, and crime rates are fairly high amongst Costa Rican youth



Youth Development

As a Youth Development volunteer, my responsibilities included partnering with local counterparts to implement projects that would teach youth valuable life skills (such as leadership, communication, and goal setting), and strengthen the net of support systems available to youth in the community by facilitating workshops for parents, teachers, and other youth workers.

During my two years of service, my counterparts and I were able to implement a weekly girls' group, a mentor program, a series of workshops about adolescence and sexuality, a comprehensive sex-ed course, an overnight camp, and update the community basketball court and park.

Skills Utilized & Developed

As any Peace Corps Volunteer will tell you, flexibility is key. Things rarely went according to plan, and my counterparts and I had to adapt our lesson plans on the fly and sometimes just be able to accept that people weren't going to show up or that we weren't going to be able to do what we had initially hoped to.

While trying to make my projects sustainable, it was critical to use those interpersonal skills to gain trust and community buy-in. Doing so took time and patience, but having a genuine interest and listening to what my students and neighbors had to say meant that we were able to accomplish great things.

Finally, the act of self-care cannot be stressed enough. The stress of learning a new language, the failure of projects, and being isolated in a remote banana farming community would have been too much to bare if I had not taken the time to care for myself.

Classroom Connections

Nearly every single course I took in 2013 at the SSW prepared me for some aspect of my Peace Corps experience in Costa Rica. The community organization and engagement classes I had provided me with the tools I needed to complete a community and sector analysis during my first few months of service, my IP classes prepared me to make lasting connections and relationships with my neighbors, and youth development classes helped me to figure out how to best serve the kids in my community.

Lessons Learned

The two years I spent in Costa Rica were the most transformative of my life. The biggest take away from my service was the importance of patience. Sure, things tend to take a bit longer in a culture where a 3 o'clock coffee break is a human right and the actual start time for anything is at least an hour after what it was supposed to be, but development in general takes time. It would be really naïve of me to say that I saw the fruits of my labor while I was in my community. I didn't because two years really isn't that long. But I can confidently say that I planted some seeds that will hopefully one day grow into trees that will produce some pretty amazing fruit.



Career Connections

I will absolutely use my experiences collecting and analyzing information about my community's assets and needs in future community organizing work. The work I did in Costa Rica reinforced my desire to pursue community organizing with youth on the grassroots level.



Advice

Be humble. Always. You do not know everything and everyone you meet will have something to teach you. Take advantage of these learning opportunities!

Be patient, but also be persistent. Yes, things move at a slower pace in developing countries, but it is often times your responsibility to be the driving force to get projects up and running. People sometimes just need a gentle nudge to get in gear

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