

# Bridging the Gaps: Reflections on Empowerment & Sustainability in Community Programming

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## EL PUENTE – THE BRIDGE



### Puerto Viejo, Talamanca, Costa Rica

Puerto Viejo is located at the south-eastern tip of Costa Rica near the Panamanian border. It is surrounded by jungles with diverse wild life and the nature has been well preserved.

As described on my site's website, El Puente-The Bridge, "Puerto Viejo hosts an eclectic mix of people and cultures from around the world." This mix includes the Indigenous Costa Ricans, Afro-Caribbean individuals, Latinxs, and international expats.

The original people, the Bribri, have walked the jungles of Talamanca for millennia and the country does great and intentional work to preserve their lands and honor their customs.



*Andi's shop has been a staple in the community for over 20 years. He has hundreds of items that he and other community members have crafted to allow visitors to take a piece of Puerto home with them.*

### Experience Abroad

I chose my location because I was familiar with the layout of the town already due to previously visiting the area. This allowed me to jump right into my work at El Puente – The Bridge without using a lot of my time getting acclimated to my surroundings.

My experience was positive. Puerto Viejo is a relaxed, small town with kind people. I was pleased to learn that I had arrived during Afro-Costa Rican History Month! This was one of the highlights of my time, as the African Diaspora and it's people, my people, continue to be a key component of my studies.

I have a commitment to the liberation and progression of African descendants and I am pleased that the School of Social Work also sees the value in students focusing on this liberation work.



*Ivon with her English tutor, John. John is from New York and has been living and teaching in Costa Rica for ten years.*

### Project Information

#### "Why did you go?"

While in Puerto Viejo, I was privileged to volunteer with El Puente-The Bridge.

This organization is committed to providing assistance in education and food security to their community members, focusing primarily on the needs of their indigenous community members, the Bribri. The goal of their program is to "provide powerful support for families working together toward self-sufficiency."

I had the opportunity to sit with the current directors and we had long conversations about sustainability of organizations, how our own biases can have an effect on our wellness, and the savior complex that many folks in helping professions have. We talked about these things all while listening to beautiful classical music and cutting up vegetables for the soup kitchen that coming weekend ( the soup kitchen happens weekly).



*Lots and lots of vegetables were chopped and this picture shows some of that beautiful chop work!*

#### "What did You Learn?"

Overall, this experience further solidified that people need the resources and information to **empower** themselves. The directors, Barry and Nancy, are transitioning out of their leadership role and this has impacted the community that they've been serving. Some folks are wondering what they're going to do once Barry and Nancy are gone. We all agreed that empowerment, liberation, and more **calculated transition plans are necessary for us to prioritize when thinking of entering and exiting communities.**

As a final product from this study, a website with reflections on the experiences is still under final construction and review. The link can be provided to those who desire to learn more details of this experience.

#### "How Did this Impact Your Future Goals as a Social Worker?"

This experience invigorated and made me hopeful for the limitless possibilities for me as a social worker. Thanks to this global independent study experience, I am crafting creative ways to get information to communities who do not have the same access to information as I, here in the United States – as a University of Michigan graduate student. I will be starting a podcast and YouTube channel with one of my former task supervisors from my current domestic field placement. We will discuss various topics that are relevant to the people in the community we serve and use the language and examples salient to them to empower them to help each other and themselves.

### Skills Utilized & Further Developed

- Community Support Building
- Research
- Writing
- Practice in Entering and Exiting Communities

### Classroom Connections

- **SW 560:** Introduction to Community Organization, Management, and Policy/Evaluation Practice
- **SW 659:** Culturally-responsive practice in African American communities: Prevention and intervention strategies with racial microaggressions
- **SW 522:** Basic Social Work Research
- **SW 713:** An Africentric Approach to Practice with African American Individuals, Families and Communities

### Lessons Learned

Much of what I learned in terms of working in communities has been shared in the other sections.

Something that I think social workers, and professionals in general, need to better prioritize is their own health and well-being as well as being committed to the liberation of **all** people and being honest about how we **all** perpetuate white supremacy. I had opportunities to deeply reflect on these topics during many long bus rides throughout my stay.

#### Below are some key takeaways:

1. Get in community with like minded folks.
2. Reserve a minimum of 30 minutes each day for you.
3. Move your body, intentionally, every day.
4. Eat like your life depends on it (it actually does).
5. Evaluate yourself with honesty and kindness.
6. **Challenge your thinking**, especially if it has been indoctrinated into you versus information that you have sought out to learn as truth (cc: importance of knowing how to access valid, minimally biased (no one is unbiased), peer-reviewed research).
  - a) It is crucial for us to own and accept that we live in a country that was colonized, led by individuals who completed mass genocide and kidnapped and enslaved African people from nations where many of their descendants do not know, and that holds whiteness as supreme.
  - b) As social workers, we must be committed to combatting the ideals and systems that stem from the aforementioned realities of this nation.
  - c) Eurocentric ways and systems are not the only ways and systems and are not always the best for all communities.
7. Ask the people who you serve what they want/need and **listen** to them.
8. Talk to yourself like you love yourself.
9. If there is not room for you at the table, build your own (ethically, without stealing and co-opting ideas and methods from Black people, Indigenous people, and other communities of color).

### Career Connections

When I was not at El Puente-The Bridge, I was mostly reading, researching, and writing. When I finally took a break, I met several jinbei drummers, the dancers who accompanied them, and many of their family and friends who joined them to celebrate during the Afro-Costa Rican festival.

I learned that two of the drummers are music professors in the Washington, D.C., Maryland, Virginia areas the and three of the family-friend travelers were social workers! One of the social workers and I are connected via email and she has agreed to mentor me as I journey into the workforce and has already sent a few job opportunities in her area. Social workers are everywhere!



### Advice

My main piece of advice: be respectful of the people with whom you are working. People are not props. The only photos I submitted for this project are of individuals with whom I have a relationship or with whom I had spoken with for more than a few minutes.

The Bri Bri families receiving support from El-Puente-The Bridge see people coming in and out of their community year round and few return. While I'm sure they would have obliged for photos, I urge individuals to reflect on how you are depicting people and investigate why the photo you're looking to capture is important to you.

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