

Mike Davenport's Experience- Belize 2007

I was not sure what to think, leaving at six thirty in the morning for a poverty stricken country where I would be accompanying a team of doctors to voluntarily give service to its inhabitants. However, I soon found that I did not have to think much, because what I would see, what these people would show me, said it all.

Our mission was to deliver a shipment of medical supplies to the hospitals and clinics in the area surrounding Belmopan, a city more or less in western Belize. My job was to assist the nurses and doctors in any way that I could and also to document the events taking place with a standard digital camera. Everything, from the one story hospital to the catholic clinic held together by a single woman who frankly should be named a saint, opened my eyes to a new world that I had not previously paid much attention to. The entire trip down could be declared moving, but it was a single experience that truly dug down to the core.

Two years prior to this trip, our leader, Dr. Pennino, visited a Mayan community that was at the base of the country's poverty. The village had no plumbing or electricity and school a few yards away. The women stayed home to look after the kids while the men walked down a long dirt road to reach a bus where they would be shuttled to work at a farm. This year, Dr. Pennino returned and brought us, the students, along to see what he had witnessed.

Upon pulling into the residential area of the community, the immediate reaction of the people was to shy away from our van full of scary white Americans. But once Dr. Pennino confronted a small family with his camera and charismatic attitude, it seemed as though they instantly warmed up to us. We all crowded around the three sisters and father to take a series of family photos which the doctor's camera displayed on the digital screen for them to see. In our society getting a family photo is no big deal and most of the time we just want the barrage of flashes to end. But that is exactly what hit so hard. These people got so overwhelmingly excited about having their picture taken because they had no cameras down there and only memories of times past. A luxury so small as a photo that we take for granted, they cherish.

When Dr. P. came two years prior, he took pictures of the people then too and returned with their developed photographs this year. Unbelievably, we managed to find a woman of whom he had taken a picture. She and everyone surrounding her were delighted. As we were all taking pictures of the adults, children, and grandparents, word of our arrival swept through the village by storm. It was not long before girls were showing up in their finest summer dresses and children were carrying their mother's best shoes so that they can capture themselves in a timeless photo while looking their best. All around me I saw nothing but smiles except for the few timid toddlers.

While taking snapshots of the group of kids, I realized that I was the one putting the smiles on their faces. I had never been the type to play with a bunch of kids and see them like that, and I could not believe that just taking their picture made them as happy as

they were. I would describe what I felt if I could, but it is the sort of thing you cannot write down on paper. All I can say is that there is a feeling of addiction, and after doing something this powerful I do not think there is a way to still the craving to do it again.