

They Deserve More: A Reflection on Belize

By Joey Leary

(Note: Nurses are often referred to as “Sister” in Belize)

I’m finding it difficult to adjust to life back at Notre Dame after spending a week in Belize. It’s not that I was living in unbearable squalor or feared for my life at any point in time. In fact our accommodations included wireless internet, stocked refrigerators with American beverages of the likes of Sprite and Coca Cola, and a beautiful pool. Life was so easy during those seven days that I almost felt ashamed when interacting with Belizeans with exponentially less luxury in their lives. Befriending David the twenty year old caretaker, sitting and speaking with Tracey the sixteen year old stabbing victim, and meeting Sister Margaret at the Good Shephard clinic in San Ignacio, were all moments in which I grew in perspective, wisdom, and compassion. I feel that these three Belizeans especially, helped provide me with a unique perspective that I’ll be able to draw insight from throughout the rest of my life.

I was quick to feel sorry for the Belizeans that I met every day. Seeing the inconvenience that was part of their everyday routines astounded and saddened me. Walking in the blistering heat to work, school, and the market; using machetes to cut brush instead of lawnmowers; waiting for hours at ill equipped clinics for healthcare; are realities for everyone living in Belize. No one seemed to want my pity however...

It was during my first day at the Good Shepherd Clinic in San Ignacio that I met Sister Margaret. It was her excitement and enthusiasm that first caught my attention as she quickly put everyone in our team to work. Six Americans arriving at her clinic unannounced didn’t cause her any grief. She was appreciative of our help but made sure that we did things her way. Hearing only a brief bit of her background, and observing her for only a day in the clinic was enough to ignite my curiosity... What could inspire a person like Margaret to leave her home and move to a third world country to serve the poor? What uniquely intangible quality moves a person to dedicate their entire life to service? Where do the likes of Sister Margaret, Paul Farmer, and Father Tom Streit find their selflessness? How can I, a possible doctor of the future, learn from their examples? These were some of the thoughts of that first day.

It wasn’t until mid week after spending a morning at Octavian Way, the nearest semblance to a retirement community in Belize, that I met Tracey and heard her remarkable story:

Tracey was 17 years old during the visit but had broken up with her boyfriend/neighbor a year prior. In his anger he stabbed her five times in the back and then sliced her throat. After doing so he apparently felt bad and thus drove her wrecked body to a hospital-clinic where the medical staff was miraculously able to save her life. We heard from the mother that the young man still lives next door with his family, and that life probably would have returned to the old way had Tracey’s spinal cord not been damaged by one of the puncture wounds, rendering her unable to walk. It hadn’t been until just before we arrived that a second x-ray had confirmed the complete severance of

her spinal cord. It was surreal sitting with Dr. Phyllis and listening to her share the news that Tracey would almost certainly be in a wheelchair for her entire life. Watching Tracey absorb this information without expressing a single tear or flinch was, again, inspiring. Tracey's mother thanked the nurse from Octavian Way for allowing them to borrow the wheelchair that Tracy had been using, helped calm the involuntary spasmodic tremors that had begun in Tracey's left leg, and then showed the three of us to the door. I hope I never forget those moments inside Tracey's home; not Tracy, not her mother, not Dr. Phyllis, nor the Swedish nurse from Octavian Way.

Befriending David, the twenty year old caretaker, changed the way that I perceived the poor Belizians for the remainder of my time in the country. He was eager to practice his ever improving English and help me with my Spanish. In speaking to David after returning from the clinics I learned that David grew up as the oldest of 5 brothers in the jungle near the Belize river. The entire family inhabited a one room shack, which was nearly 10 miles from the nearest paved road, and further from a school. For food his father and he would hunt in the jungle and eat indigenous and homegrown plants and fruit. As I was particularly infatuated with the presence of freshwater crocodiles in the area I couldn't help but inquire about life in the jungle with these predators. He told me that for fun he and his friends would drink a bottle of rum and spear crocodiles at night in the river; swimming with flashlights in their mouths and a talapia spear in one hand. However as a young boy hunting with his father he once had to jump into a small pond, known to be home to several large crocs, in order to fetch a wounded bird that dropped into the water. David said he was sure he was going to die, but his dad would have beaten him if he had refused. He also told me that he never went to school because his father needed him around the house and it would have been too far of a walk. David had never seen a pair of shoes until he was 13. Our ages were essentially the only thing that the two of us had in common. Toward the end of the trip David shared with me that he had a two year old girl, and that is why he worked so much. He told me that when he was young no one had told him about condoms, or even how sex could result in new life. When his girlfriend became pregnant it was a surprise to both of them as they had just been "experimenting" according to David. I couldn't help but think of the number of girls I knew at Notre Dame who's parents had them taking birth control pills to prevent this vary scenario. When I asked David how he felt working at the Jungle Dome and pandering to such wealthy visitors he told me that he felt no resentment, and hoped to come to America some day. The most striking thing he said to me was that he doesn't understand why people would feel sorry for him. He said he has the best job of anyone he knows, working at the Jungle Dome, and a child, Jasmine, who he would do anything for. He said if he had the money to travel to other countries he would do it too. While in Belize David convinced me that it doesn't take cars, money, education, or power to make someone happy, but rather it takes basic fundamental opportunities such as a job that pays a living wage and access to basic healthcare.

These three experiences have left me feeling that it really wouldn't take much effort by the individuals with money and power to greatly improve the quality of life in countries like Belize. Not everyone in Belize is as fortunate as David. Yes, David told me that he feels like he has everything he needs and does not understand why someone would be sorry for him. So let's emulate people like David who may be satisfied with so

little, but that doesn't mean that Americans with so much should ignore the inconvenience and suffering of the rest. The energy required to provide a laptop for Tracey, a microscope for Sister Margaret, or internet access for all of the young Belizian Scouts, would be miniscule in comparison to the opportunity that it would provide these individuals. Satisfied or not, Belizians deserve more.