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Service Learning Reflection: Children's Hospital in Seville, Spain

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Dedicated to the International College of Seville and in memory of Christine Ervin—

Thank you ICS and staff for (excuse my language) putting up with my bullshit for three months. I greatly appreciate it now that I’m back in the states.

Thank you Christine for making sure I was well-informed on the volunteer program and always being available to help. You were a great volunteer coordinator and part of why I enjoyed my experience so much was because the program and communication were set up well.

I hopped on a plane to Seville, Spain in September of last year to attend the International College of Seville through study abroad at Parkland College. There, among the numerous opportunities going on for students to develop themselves while in a foreign country, was the offer of service learning. There was a whole presentation on it(coupled with the offer of internships), and it introduced the school to the various options of volunteering, such as at a local orphanage, working with the elderly, with refugees, and et cetera. I decided to service-learn through the organization Prodean, which is a volunteer organization that covers multiple areas of volunteer work including work at one of the local children’s’ hospitals.

I got the ball rolling about a month after I had had time to adjust to being in a different country. First, out of curiosity on a leisurely Sunday walk I set out to find the hospital the volunteering would be at. And lo and behold, it was only 10 minutes walking straight behind my homestay apartment! There was a whole hospital community there, with different types of hospitals, and I believe it was also part of the biomedical/medical research branch of the
University of Seville. Afterwards, I contacted ICS’ volunteer coordinator about my intent to volunteer and she helped me fill out the forms related to it and contact the people in charge of the program I wanted to work with. We worked out a time for me to volunteer, and all the logistics along that line.

As for the actual volunteering process, I went to the hospitals on Fridays from 5-7 with other volunteers to run the Ciber@ula, which is a playroom for the kids full of puzzles, boardgames, paints, computers, books, and other things to entertain them while they were in the hospital. The routine would consist of walking to the hospital, going up the second floor to the Ciber@ula, meeting up with the other volunteers, setting up the playroom and the area around it, signing in, and donning a red volunteer vest. Then we’d split up, and some of us stayed in the room while the others went throughout the hospital to knock on the doors of patients to invite them and their parents to come to the playroom, or, if they couldn’t come, to ask if they wanted us to bring them a toy/book. Then, we’d distribute toys/books as needed and play with the kids. The kids’ age range varied from baby to 17 years old. At the end of the session, we’d go around the hospital rooms again to recollect any distributed items, say goodbye to the kids/parents, make everyone used hand sanitizer, take off our vests, and clean up the area/lock up. Then, I’d walk home and usually stop by Mercadona, the big chain-grocery store nearby to pick up something for my housemom. Our program took us on a lot of excursions, so I often missed Fridays, but was in contact with the coordinator for the Friday group and in the group chat for it as well, so was always in the loop/kept others in the loop. There were also time slots for Saturdays, which I went to a few times, but decided Friday worked better.

The first thing I noticed was that people were super open and friendly, and that the vibe of things was pretty relaxed. It felt like just playing normally with kids, except with hospital
pajamas and IV poles. There was no “you’re in a hospital I must treat you with pity and nicer than usual” type of thing. That is how the community where I was staying was in general, very open and welcoming, and I feel that because that type of energy was present in the hospital it didn’t seem cold and sterilized, and kept the atmosphere positive when kids and their parents are in an otherwise sucky and boring situation. The people I was working with were all super open and nice and were very good with interacting with the kids. There was no type of judgmental vibe nor the feeling of being obligated to talk to your peers whatsoever, as they were all easygoing with each other and made of the volunteer work a good time (it was a lot of fun overall). I also noticed on the part of the parents, and it had been said as well at the ICS orientation, that it was a kind of relief/providing some downtime for them because it’s stressful to have a kid in the hospital. On the part of the kids, I noticed they were all very well-behaved, and they never tried to do anything funny or act out. Perhaps it’s because they have the experience of being in the hospital, which makes them more aware to certain things. Also contributing to that may be the fact that they’re in the hospital recovering and were allowed to go to the Ciber@ula after being cooped up in their rooms and undergoing medical checkups/procedures all day. Granted, the kids I volunteered with there were only in the hospital for a few weeks at a time, with more minor health problems rather than long-term stays for serious illnesses. I would play with the kids, but also have conversations with the parents a lot of the time consisting of small talk, such as what they had been doing so far that day, their interests, plans for upcoming holidays, and things about Spanish culture, since I think I was the only foreign volunteer there.

Speaking of being the only foreign volunteer, the people I worked with were all Spaniards and I had to have my Spanish game at 200% since I was not only using it to
communicate, but also using it in a setting where I had to be responsible for/direct something. The first time I went around with the volunteers to visit rooms and invite people to go up to the Ciber@ula, I was a bit scared to be honest. I was with two girls, one who had been volunteering there for about 5 years and another new person like me, so the girl who had experience was explaining to us how it worked. During our conversation, the other new girl and I asked her why she decided to come volunteer, to which she replied, “you get hooked to it man!” and that no two weeks were alike since there were always new kids coming in. After a while of going to the different wings and asking the nurses which kids could go play and knocking on their doors, she asked me if I wanted to try knocking on a door and asking. I shit myself a little on the lowdown, as I am generally a shy person, and pair that with asking strangers if their kid wants to go to a playroom in a different language when their family is under the pressure of having a kid in the hospital, it was slightly intimidating. Once I did it though, it broke the mold of intimidation and became habitual for all the rest of the times I did it. I find that because of that experience, now when I speak Spanish in a setting where I need to direct and lead something it’s as if I suddenly strapped a loudspeaker to myself and can interact with people seamlessly.

I would like to offer a few anecdotes from the times I volunteered.

1

The first day, was there was a kid who was autistic and couldn’t leave his hospital room. We agreed to bring him some toys from the playroom and decided someone could go spend time with him in his room, which I volunteered myself for. That’s what my instinct was, so I followed it. Previously in high school I had been in Best Buddies (a club for connecting neurotypical with neurodiverse kids) and also follow people on youtube, so I had experience/knowledge on how to interact with neurodiverse kids. I went to the room, and the boy and his parents were there. First,
the nurses had me sanitize my hands and put on a mask/gown/gloves, and I went into the room and gave them the few toys I had brought from the playroom. Then, his father went out and his mom stayed. They told me he had had an epileptic fit the day before, so he was pretty tired. When I was there, I mostly chatted with his mom and we alternated between dancing around, reading him a picture book, playing with the toys from the Ciber@ula, and letting him watch clips of a TV show on a device he had to try to keep him awake. In the end he fell asleep, and his mom told me, “I think he’s done” and that she wanted to let him sleep a little, but not too much because then he wouldn’t sleep at night. Overall, in the approximately two hours I spent there I got to know them pretty well, and his mom ended by telling me, “You can come whenever you want, we’ll be here for a few more weeks.” While we were dancing around, she had taught me a Spanish nursery rhyme that the dance went along with (El patio de mi casa-The Patio to my House), and asked me if I knew any in English, to which I sang a rendition of Ring Around the Rosy. Now, every time I remember that nursery rhyme, it reminds me of them.

On occasion I went to the hospital on Saturdays, which I did the week I started. On that morning the sunlight filtered into the room through the ample windows, and there was a different group of volunteers than the ones from Friday evening. They were sitting at the tables playing bingo and painting with the kids, invited me to join them. There was a kid who asked me to guess her name by giving me clues, and I purposely played around a bit at guessing before getting her name right, which she seemed slightly unsure about. Then, the people at the table asked me where I was from, and I told them that I am from the U.S. on exchange for 3 months, but my family is originally from Taiwan. One of the volunteers told me that his sister was studying Mandarin in college and spoke some words in Chinese to me, and after that the people
at the table started asking me how to say things in Mandarin and the kid who had originally asked me to guess her name started speaking to me in gibberish that I’m guessing she meant to be Chinese, while giving me high-fives. It was a cool situation in which the people I was with took interest in me and where I was from. I found it to be different from the US, because here if people started asking me how to say things and speaking gibberish because I’m Taiwanese, most likely it would be coined as offensive, or at least awkward. But there, as I had learned from classes at the International College, people are very straightforward in interacting with each other and it’s hard to offend anyone. If something is some way, people just say it as it is but treat it no different from anything else, and they certainly didn’t treat me differently than anyone else in the room. Doing those things in the context of the society in which I was staying had no link to discrimination, but rather friendliness. For this though, I can only talk from my own experience as I can’t speak for the experiences of minorities who actually live in Seville. From this experience and others of living in that community, I’ve become more aware of how sensitive the culture is in the US regarding interacting with people of different racial/ethnic backgrounds. And it has a reason, which is that race is tied to discrimination. Because of that, if people ask me how to say something in Chinese or speak gibberish to me, or even ask me where I’m “really” from, it is looked down upon as offensive or awkward because it is, again, remotely tied down to discrimination or assuming things. But where I’m from and the Chinese language, and even trying to imitate it in a way that’s not trying to make fun of it (which is kind of a hard concept to grasp) are just facts and harmless actions, and talking about them openly is not going to hurt anybody. It is just again, that the mentality in the US has those things so tightly connected to racism and discrimination that even mentioning them brings up a connotation of offense and uncomfortableness. The takeaway from this is that before, I would have been uncomfortable at
these things, but now, to be honest I don’t really care because people are just curious and most of the time in no way have malicious intent with it (and if they do, that’s their problem).

3

There was a kid there who was older than everyone else, and she was in the hospital for a few weeks having had major surgery. A part of her head was shaved, on which she had a big scar running down it. I soon started to recognize her and I believe she did I as well, since for three weeks’ time when I went on Fridays I’d always see her. She liked to spend a lot of the time sitting at the tables, playing with putty, coloring/painting, and chatting with the volunteers, some who were her age. She was super talkative, telling the volunteers that she had spent a ton of time in bed and in the hospital room until she was finally allowed to go out and get some fresh air/go buy candy with her mom, which she was munching on at the time I met her. Her mom had told her she seemed a lot less down as soon as she got to go out, and then she proceeded to tell us how they would argue over who got to watch the TV, either her with Spongebob or her mom with her soap operas. I tried to have conversations with her as I got to know her, although I’d always get lost in the middle of them because I couldn’t always understand what she was talking about because she talked so fast and Spanish is not my native tongue. In the end I never got to know her super well, but I think she is an awesome kid regardless.

4

There was a kid who came in to play on the computers. He had also had major surgery, and they had done it on his neck/throat so he couldn’t talk much. I set him and his mom up on one of the computers, and all the while was asking questions to which his mom was answering. Their family, especially the kid, was very keen on religion (Seville in general is very influenced
by Catholicism). They told me about the Feria, which is a huge religious celebration that happens in April (think parading down the streets with floats of saints for a week consecutively) and how they celebrated it. He conducted searches on google images for various saints, and then went online-shopping for a cape-like piece of clothing that they told me is used in a religious ceremony (this is again where culturally and language-wise it got a bit muddy and I started to not understand). But I found it cool how in the US kids usually go online shopping for video games and toys while there was this kid in Spain shopping for religious apparel.

5

There was a kid whose mom had come to Spain from Nigeria and had had heart surgery (that I’m guessing from the scar he had on his chest, I don’t actually know). A caretaker had come with him to the playroom, and he was super quiet and didn’t want to do anything. A lot of the volunteers tried talking to him in English and offering him a paintbrush to paint with, or writing his name/ introductions on the chalkboard in the room. I tried talking to him as well, in French first before I was told he was from Nigeria, and then in English. He stood in one corner of the room with the volunteers while we chatted with his caretaker, looking wide-eyed around the room until one of us volunteers, who was video-game savvy and often took charge of letting the kids take turns on the PS4 console in the playroom, invited him to come over to watch the other kids play on the console. At first he just sat to the side and watched, but then it sparked his interest and got him to open up and he started to play on the console with the other kids. Afterwards, I told one girl I was volunteering with who had written to him on the chalkboard and tried to get him to open up that she did a really good job, and she told me that she’d been to Chicago to study for 6 months (that’s where she learned English) and that (if memory serves me correctly) she was studying psychology.
There was a couple who came in with their two-year old. At first, when we had gone around knocking on doors I had just kind of barged into their room while they were changing his diaper, which I felt bad about and because of that didn’t really do a great job telling them about the Ciber@ula. Then, as we were walking down the hallway I told one of the girls I was working with about it, and she said, “I know it was uncomfortable because the kid was naked...[and then I forget the rest of what she said].” After a while of running the playroom, I went back up to the kid’s hospital room by myself to ask again if they wanted to go, since I wasn’t sure it went well the first time and they said “sure, why not?” I soon realized that it wasn’t really that big of a deal that I opened the door on them changing their kid, as they and the other volunteers seemed to pass it off as normal and didn’t seem to care. In the playroom, I entertained the kid while his parents took care of some business. Then his mom joined in and at one point she asked me, “Do you guys do this because you want to?” and I thought about it and answered, “Yeah, you get to come play with kids.” And at that point, I realized I never thought too hard about going to volunteer, it was just an opportunity that seemed cool so I took it.

For the organization Prodean, there was a meeting that was mandatory for people volunteering in any of the areas the organization served. The volunteer coordinator at ICS told me that I didn’t need to go since I was only staying for 3 months, and I wasn’t planning on going. But the meeting ended up being after one of the Friday volunteer sessions, and I made the spontaneous decision to go with a couple of the people I was volunteering with after they asked
me whether or not I was going. The meeting was in a medium-sized conference room full of high school to college-aged kids, and lead by one of the directors of the organization. There were so many people present that all the chairs were taken, and we sat against the wall along with many other people. The meeting started by discussing the importance and reason for volunteering, proceeded by watching a documentary called *Binta and the Great Idea*, with discussion about it afterwards. We then divided into groups and did an exercise on children’s digital rights in the 20th century, and ended by writing what we liked about volunteering (or something of the sort, my memory’s rusty on that too) on post-it notes, and sticking them on the wall. During that meeting the one thing I noticed was peoples’ enthusiasm for volunteering. There were the annoying teenage boys who made comments, but there were also people who were genuinely interested in learning about volunteering. After the exercise on digital rights, the groups had to go up and present their answers in which one girl said, “volunteering is not really about what you can give to other people, you must think about what other people are giving to you and really listen and pay attention to the people you are working with” and that stuck with me. After the meeting, I stayed around and read the post-it notes, and what people wrote on them was actually incredibly genuine. Although I have never volunteered long-term in the community of Seville so I don’t see the whole picture, from what I have seen, it is what ICS’ volunteer coordinator’s told me it was during a conversation: a very giving society. That was a contrast to what I have experience with volunteering in the states. People in the states volunteer and are very genuine about it as well, no doubt about that, but here I have never been to a meeting where the reason behind volunteering and ethics/rights are discussed with a big group of people. In the US, with the organizations I have worked with compared to the volunteer work in Seville sometimes there seems to be a hint of artificiality. People want to volunteer because they want to do good, but
also at times, it seems like they do it to feel good about themselves by putting themselves in a “benefactor” position or to look good on a resume.

There are many other anecdotes to share, but for the sake of the reflection’s length I will stop it here. Overall, doing volunteer work in another community made me realize many things about where I live and come from. Reflecting back, it was an ample learning experience although I initially only did it out of curiosity of what the experience would be like. While I was doing the work, I never let many people know about it because I wanted to have this experience be my own without too many other peoples’ input on it, and it has indeed been very helpful to me on my own terms. And like the girl in the meeting said, I feel the experience and people I was working with have taught me more than what I have contributed to them.