

Recap of the Brigade:

The Notre Dame Global Medical Brigade traveled to Nicaragua for a total of five days, flying in and out of the capital, Managua, and staying in the small city of Esteli about three hours away. Our Brigade consisted of 29 students from Notre Dame (all different ages) 3 doctors from South Bend, Indiana, 1 faculty chaperon, multiple translators from Nicaragua, and our Global Medical Brigades coordinator who grew up in Nicaragua himself. The hotel that we stayed at in Esteli also housed several other large groups of students who were from a wide range of schools in the United States and also serving on their own Brigades in Nicaragua as well. Some of the schools that I saw students from were Vanderbilt, Texas A&M International, and Tufts. In total, we spent four out of the total five days in Nicaragua providing medical care to surrounding rural communities. The first two days of the Brigade, we drove two and a half hours out into the barren countryside of a beautiful 2,000-person community called Agua Zarca. Within this community, a small two room medical clinic existed, the very place where we set up our Brigade and provided medical care to community members.

When we arrived at the clinic, individuals from the community were already waiting outside the fence that surrounded the small clinic; any individual from the community was welcome. Some patients had walked miles from their houses just to receive treatment. We set up our Brigade as six individual stations that each had a different purpose; patients would move from station to station throughout the day. These individuals would first begin at station “charla” or “chat” in spanish where they would learn about general techniques about how to stay healthy. At the adult “charla” station, community health workers talked to the adults about specific ways they could improve their families’ health and provided tips for developing healthy habits at home. Advice ranged from washing food before meals to taking anti-parasitic pills when drinking water. At the kids “charla” station, students like myself passed out toothbrushes, toothpaste, floss, and other supplies to kids. We helped them brush their teeth, sang songs about healthy brushing, and rubbed fluoride on their teeth.

After the “charla” station, all patients would move to the “triage” station where students would write down their reasons for visiting the medical clinic and what kind of treatment they required. Then, students would take the blood pressure, pulse, height, and weight of the patients before these community members would visit one of the six available doctors at the next station. At the “treatment” station, six doctors (three from the United States and three from Nicaragua), treated patients while students like myself shadowed, asked questions to the patients, and helped diagnose patient pain and illnesses. From there, patients would then visit the one dentist or ophthalmologist on site if they were dealing with dental or vision problems. The rest of the patients would then walk to the make-shift pharmacy about 25 yards away in one of the houses to collect their prescribed medication. It was quite the process. Throughout the day, each student on the Brigade was assigned and would rotate positions at several of the stations. Whether I was shadowing the doctors, filling prescriptions in the pharmacy, or playing with kids at the “charla” station, I was always busy, but also having a total blast.

In total, we treated a almost 600 patients from Agua Zarca, not a small task. During the day, the community members were extremely patient and thankful for our help. At the end of each visit to their community, we would gather in a large circle where we both would express our gratitude

for the aid and opportunity to see their community. The third day of the Brigade, we drove out to the larger community of Paso Carreta, a community stationed in the middle of large fields of tobacco, cocoa, and rice. Dividing the Brigade up into the same stations as the days before, we provided more medical care and learned about their incredible community. The third day alone, we were able to treat almost 500 patients! Our final day on the Brigade took a new turn as we traveled to another community high up in the hills of southern Esteli to help dig a trench for a new water system. For hours, we crushed large chunks of buried rock with pick axes and shoveled dirt until a noticeable trench began taking form. Hands ringing and shoulders aching, the work was exhilarating but exhausting. After digging the trench, the community gave us a tour of their village and we were returned back to Esteli for the night. What a week.

What I learned from the Brigade:

1) The world does not revolve around you: Leaving the country for the first time opened my eyes to the contrasting lifestyles that exist in the world. I thought I knew how life worked in a developing country. Little did I know. I had always believed that harsher and impoverished lifestyles still included aspects of life that I was used to such as paved roads, grocery stores, and running water. I was blown away by the lack of these “normal” aspects of living in Nicaragua, features of life that I had intrinsically thought that everybody experienced. I remember realizing that if an upper middle class male from a developed country was as shocked as I was by the stark contrast of lifestyles in the world, then many individuals in developing countries around the world must lack an even greater knowledge than myself of the different “worlds” that exist on this earth. I can only imagine how shocking other individuals living in developing countries like Nicaragua would find this contrast. I learned how lucky I am to have personally viewed these different existing lifestyles, an experience that not many people receive. I need to always remember that this sharp contrast does exist so that I make my life decisions with the needs of all people in mind rather than just my own. Every choice we make, no matter how big or small, should positively impact everybody’s “world,” not just our own.

2) You have a duty, not a choice, to help others: Nobody chooses their family, where they born, or their families’ economic state. Those are inherent aspects of life, for better or for worse. I have been privileged to live in a developed country by a loving family, gifts that many people would do anything to have. Meeting individuals from Nicaragua, I was deeply humbled by their lifestyle. Dirt huts consisting of two small rooms, hardened mud walls, and pieces of wood dangling off the ceiling was the norm. Most families had a few plastic cracked dishes, but very few possessed running water. I have never felt so humbled in my life. Compared to these homes, my air-conditioned, clean house was a luxurious castle. However, despite the enormous simplicity of these houses, each family lived in contentment. They welcomed the other students and I into their homes, allowing us, complete strangers, to completely overtake their small living space with chairs, boxes of medicine, and tables so we could set up each station. The Brigade taught me that I have the chance to make a substantial difference in others’ lives all because of inherent aspects of life that I never chose. Stepping foot in these Nicaraguan houses woke me up to the fact that people are desperately relying on us to use our resources to change this world. There is no “choosing” this; it’s an expectation, a duty, a way of life that comes along with the life “hand” that I was dealt.

3) You can always choose happiness: One of the biggest things that I noticed about the patients that I met was how happy and content they were with themselves and their way of life. Yes, they lived a very simple life compared to my own life back in the United States, but these community members were happy with what they did have and embraced the life that they had been dealt. One of my many observations that speaks to this fact was the large pictures on the walls of many of the houses I entered. Hanging on many of the barren walls were beautiful pictures of school graduations, marriages, and other meaningful life events. They signified the families' pride for their accomplishments and gratitude for their gifts in life. In one corner of every house, large devotional pictures of Jesus stood along with other Catholic crucifixes and pictures. The communities had incredible faith and chose to focus on the gifts of life rather than what they lacked. I learned that happiness is found by feeling content with what you have rather than the desire and search for more items. The amount of money or material goods someone has does not correlate with their happiness. Yes, we aren't always going to be happy in life and that is perfectly normal. However, we all have the opportunity to choose happiness over sadness or desire when we recognize how blessed we are in life.

4) Staying healthy is a true privilege: I noticed a trend throughout the trip – only when the basic aspects of living had been fulfilled did individuals begin thinking about health, hobbies, and other “less” important parts of life. As crazy as it sounds, staying healthy is not the number one priority in life. Our top priority as humans is surviving: obtaining the necessary food, water, shelter, and clothing needed to survive to the next day. Although individuals never complained of a lack of these necessities, many patients' lives only revolved around acquiring these necessities. Exercise, sports, and health were not the main priority. To that point, I only saw three runners outside on the street my entire time in Nicaragua; sports are a luxury, not a given part of life. I personally experienced this on my Brigade in Nicaragua. Because we were constrained in how much clean water we could use and how much fresh food was available to eat, I found myself not caring as much that I couldn't wash my hands with clean water very much or that I couldn't spend any time exercising. I was just focused on meeting my basic needs as that truly is the only thing essential for survival. I learned that something so basic as exercise, a central part of my life in the United States, is a “bonus” in life and a true gift. Only after one fulfills their basic life needs can they begin thinking about their health.

5) Always stay humble: Someone is always experiencing something more difficult and painful than you. Always. The contrast between the simple lifestyle in Nicaragua compared to the excess ways of life in the United States greatly humbled me. It's not fair that this disparity exists in the world and it truly is an injustice that needs to be correct. However, I've found that adopting a humble attitude has helped me remember that this injustice exists and that I need to stay grateful for every blessing in my life. An experience on the Brigade that hammered home this point was on the final day while digging the water trench. Exhilarating but difficult, attacking the solid rock in the ground with a pick-axe for hours was one of the hardest manual jobs I have ever endured. It took at least ten hits with the pick-axe for any large noticeable chunks of rock to dislodge, a fact that challenged me both physically and mentally. What struck me about this experience was not just my own struggle with the pick-axe, but the idea that this was how these community members dug holes and trenches in the earth. There were no backhoes. No tractors. No steam shovels; just simple metal tools and a person's will. Workers dig these trenches every day for the entire year. I struggled to imagine the difficulty of that lifestyle as I struggled with

this task for over the course of only a few hours. Humility is essential; with it comes a greater awareness that someone is always experiencing difficulties greater than your own.

6) Appreciate the least noticeable aspects of life: Traveling to Nicaragua opened my eyes to the benefits we take for granted of living in a developed country: paved roads, our relative safety, the many stores & available resources, etc. I had never thought of life without factors such as the ability to walk down the street to buy food or the opportunity to drive on smooth roads. In Nicaragua, I experienced a lack of these aspects of life that I had taken for granted back in the US. Going the entire week without a mobile phone connection? That wasn't hard. However, I sure began to appreciate having the ability to pick up the phone at any time and call my parents back home in the States where a mobile connection was "normal." Two of the greatest aspects of my life that I have only now begun to fully appreciate is access to clean water and a safe living environment as both were not easy to come by in Nicaragua. Yes, I experienced both aspects throughout the brigade, but I witnessed many people who did not have such access to clean water or who experienced the threat of violence. Some of the smallest parts of our life make the largest difference in the type of life that we live on this earth.

7) All people share more similarities than differences: Despite some of the large differences in culture and lifestyles, I began to notice how similar the Nicaraguan people were to myself and the Americans that I normally interacted with on a daily basis in the United States. I began to realize that everyone has very similar desires in life – to be loved, to be treated with dignity, and to be accepted, etc. We even share the same life struggles such as sickness, rejection, and loneliness. It's easy to put those who live a different lifestyle or who speak another language into a separate "box" and point out the differences. However, in Nicaragua, I was struck by how similar I was to the patients that I was treating. I especially noticed this when interacting and playing with all of the kids. When a doctor wasn't treating them, the kids were running around screaming their heads off, tackling each other, and jumping all over us. They were acting as all kids act, energetic and joyful. I arrived in Nicaragua thinking that the lack of excessive resources and even basic necessities would impact how the Nicaraguan people acted. I thought that they would be in some way different from me. I was completely wrong.

8) Be grateful for the gifts of life: It does not matter the type of lifestyle you live; it is incredibly important to simply be grateful for that lifestyle no matter the amount of challenges you are currently going through. Even in the worst of circumstances, each person in this world can choose to recognize the gifts bestowed upon them. Countless gifts in life make living that much easier and joyful. Since traveling to Nicaragua, I have become more grateful for the simple gifts of having food to eat, clean water to drink, stores where I can buy food, and a home that keeps protects me from all elements of weather. These aspects of my life are very easy to look past and take for granted. However, millions of people in this world don't get to enjoy those these life aspects and may never have the opportunity to enjoy them. Even when challenges arise and life adversity occurs, step back and take a moment to remember just one gift that makes life more fruitful and meaningful. Yes, the individuals whom I interacted with had very little; however, that did not make them any less grateful for the gifts present in their life.

9) Internal “goods” truly provide lasting fulfillment: Many people wish to find fulfillment in their lives and seek out ways in which they might achieve this feeling. Traveling to Nicaragua taught me that money and possessions have no correlation to fulfillment. Instead, the internal goods of life such as relationships, family, values, faith, optimism, and the attitude of serving others with dignity and love bring about fulfillment. Despite possessing less external goods than myself, the individuals I met from Nicaragua still lived fulfilling and content lives. Every time I walked into one of their homes, I noticed how happy and kind everybody was towards me. If I didn't know any better, I would have thought that they possessed every external good and lived without struggle. Something else that stuck out to me was the patience of every person at the medical clinics. Community members would walk miles to the clinic and then wait in long lines for multiple hours at a time just to receive treatment. Nobody pushed. Nobody expressed frustration. Nobody even objected when we took a break for lunch. Instead, they smiled, expressed gratitude, and shared conversation with us. External goods like money have the capability of bestowing some opportunities in life, but they don't come close to bringing about the fulfillment and happiness that internal goods provide.

10) Complete effort and dedication can change this world: Many people believe think that they can only change this world through large actions such as donating a million dollars to charity or building houses in a developing country. That couldn't be further from the truth. Small actions have an amazing impact on lives and ultimately change the world in ways that we can't even always see. For example, just expressing a kind word towards someone can change their life; you don't know what that person is going through. Similarly, giving one's complete focus in each present task whether that be watching sports, studying in school, or having a conversation ultimately positively changes this world. Yes, it's not fair that some individuals in the United States have so much while many in South America do not. It's not fair that individuals are born into well off families while others are not. However, remaining present each day and living each moment as if it's your last makes an unbelievable difference in the world. Making the very most of every situation allows one to become more apt to fighting injustice and being willing to step in and challenge the wrong that exists in this world. Everybody can do this. All it takes is the willingness to focus on what is right in front of your eyes at this very moment.