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Spanish Major

Latin American Studies Minor

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On August 28<sup>th</sup>, 2015 I arrived at the Minneapolis airport before the sun began to rise. At the airport I met some of the girls I would be spending the next three and a half months with for the first time. Eventually we made our way to Central America without having any idea what it would be like to live abroad for a semester or what we would experience living with host families and only speaking in Spanish.

Over the following three and a half months, the group I was with from Eau Claire became closer and closer. We were able to experience Costa Rica and Nicaragua together and share our funny and awkward host family experiences with each other. Living with host families turned out to be an amazing experience. The first couple days were very challenging in Costa Rica and Nicaragua, but then daily habits would form and it became easier to understand our families every day. We slowly learned the habits of our families and were able to notice the similarities and differences between our Costa Rican and Nicaraguan families and our families back home.

In Costa Rica is where the majority of my classes took place; others had a more busy schedule in Nicaragua. This was very different than having class in Eau Claire because the most we ever had in a class was ten people. We had our own professors just for our group and we were able to get pretty close to them and spend time with some of them outside of class. Throughout our classes we were able to use what we learned on a daily basis and see how things impacted Central America.

Looking back on my experiences abroad, I can recall how timid we all were to ask people for help or directions in Spanish. At the end of the trip, everyone in the group was comfortable enough to not only ask complete strangers for directions, but even strike up conversations in Spanish with whomever. Although I am nowhere near fluent in Spanish and my accent is still

difficult for Spanish speakers to understand, it is a great feeling to be confident enough to use Spanish and be able to get around Spanish speaking countries using only Spanish.

Since we were abroad in December, we were able to experience a lot of celebration pertaining to La Virgen. This was most prominent for one particular week and involved a lot of decorations and parade float type of things. Every night for about a week, floats and people went down a different street in Granada, the city we lived in. Another aspect of Central America that stood out a lot was the importance of religion and church to many families. A large percentage of the population throughout Central America practices Catholicism and this was often evident throughout some of our host families.

One thing that was difficult in Nicaragua at times was seeing people struggle to make money. In parts of Nicaragua it was easy to see how precious money was and how hard it was for some people to get a job. There were always vendors in the street trying to make money by selling random items or food. I think this represented how certain institutions were ran and how even governmental decisions affects citizens and how they live day to day.

The United States and Costa Rica have a history of past relations. Today, the United States is Costa Rica's biggest trading partner. Because of this, there is a lot of interaction between these two countries. Throughout history, the United States has given and retracted aid from Costa Rica and Central America many times.

The United States has also had many different types of relations with Nicaragua. In the past, the United States was in support of the Contras because they feared communism by the Sandinistas. The United States also didn't like the Sandinista ties with the Soviet Union and

Cuba. Today, the United States continues to be involved throughout Central America because of past, present, and future relations and also because of the large number of tourists that visit Central America from the United States.

Studying abroad improved my Spanish and my confidence to actually use Spanish. It also helped me learn about and get a better appreciation of the culture and history in Central America. Being a Spanish major and Latin American Studies minor, every aspect of being in Central America has benefitted my future professional goals. In addition, the opportunity to teach English has made me realize even more that I am also interested in teaching English abroad in a Spanish speaking country such as Spain. I recently have added Teaching English as a Foreign Language classes to my schedule and will be adding a TEFL certificate to my undergraduate degree.

In Nicaragua, a few of us had the chance to teach English to children at GoCare. This was an awesome experience, but also difficult at times. The first few days of being in class with the students we didn't know what we needed to bring or supply for the students. Many times, some of the students would come to class without anything, and other times few students would even show up to class. It was also very common for nobody to show up for at least 15 minutes after class had begun. This made it hard for us to plan lesson plans and we often felt that there was a lot of disorganization at the school.

Growing up in the United States, we are taught that being on time is very important and also that time is money. Being in Central America for over three months showed us how differently some people treat the concept of time. We eventually were able to relax more and not put such a big focus on being on time and getting as much done as we possibly could in an

allotted time, but rather, just go with the flow. The tranquil way of life found throughout Central America also allowed us to focus our attention more towards relations with people and just spending time and talking to others versus always having to do something or have a schedule with plans.

The challenges we faced allowed us to take a step back and look at things from a different perspective. I think it is very easy for people to get caught up on things and think that their way of doing something is the only way, but there are so many other brilliant ways of thinking and doing something.

I think this entire trip was the experience of a lifetime and we were able to experience so many different opportunities that it's almost difficult to put them all into words. Being in Central America for over three months allowed me to not only experience different cultures, but also meet some amazing people from a different part of the world. Being able to get around and travel using a second language was also a great opportunity and I hope that I am able to convince others to study abroad by sharing this wonderful experience.



This is a picture of some of the children at GoCare where we volunteered. This was a great experience and we were able to interact with kids from all different backgrounds.



This picture shows part of the chocolate making process; we were able to learn the entire process from indigenous people. Interacting with people from the BriBri tribe was a lot of fun and very informative. I now have even more respect for the indigenous because we were able to see the importance of nature to them and how everything is respected and not wasted.