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Spanish Minor

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I participated in the eight week study abroad program in San Isidro de Heredia, Costa Rica. This was the general liberal arts program, not the nursing specific program. Housing was one student placed in a host family that provided meals and an outstanding opportunity to be immersed in the culture. I took two courses of three credits to earn six total credits over the eight weeks. The courses that I completed were Advanced Conversation and Culture of Costa Rica.

Costa Rica does something that I had never seen or heard of when a family member dies. Once a month for a year after they pass, the family gets together on the same day to pray and remember their loved one. It is not just the immediate family that participates in this; cousins, neighbors, and friends gather at one home and fill it with love and memories. A lead speaker guides the group in praying the rosary. Afterwards, everyone eats and converses. I attended three of these events, called *rezas*, when I was with my family. The value that Costa Rica places on family is incredible and I'm very blessed that I was invited to experience this on many occasions.

Another moment where the value of family was undeniable was Father's Day. Like the United States, the families spent time together, but the difference was that my host mom's entire family went to visit their father at the same time that day. There were at least 40 people in the living room of her parent's home, and everyone was telling silly childhood stories and memories. Although this was overwhelming at first, especially when they all wanted to hear about Father's Day in the US, this experience taught me that the love and value that a family holds is priceless and irreplaceable.

The relationships of power between men and women are very evident in Costa Rica. My host dad was often at work while my mom took care of the house and my host sister and myself. My host mom also worked and attended college classes in the evening in addition to having the responsibility of cooking and cleaning. I never saw my host dad make any meals or do any

laundry; it was expected of the woman. These relations are present in the US, but my parents have always had equal responsibilities with work, cleaning, cooking, and raising us kids. It was frustrating at first to see men treat women with less respect.

In class we studied the machismo that males from Latin America are taught to have and how it is expected that they will be the leaders in anything they do. Once I learned that it was part of their culture, I began to see how there are so many things in the culture from the States that is simply second nature to me or was just expected. The pledge of allegiance is something that no other country does but it was so ingrained in me throughout school. I never questioned why I did it every day; it was simply part of my life. This was the connection that I made to the relationships of power between men and women.

The United States and Costa Rica have had a good relationship since Costa Rica's independence. We have worked together to help secure their borders and have formed our own guidelines for crimes and assistance that is provided at sea. Costa Rica and the United States also participate in a free trade agreement that greatly benefits both countries.

In the Costa Rica culture class we learned that there are different types of catcalls in Costa Rica. Some are very poetic, rehearsed, and complimentary whereas others are offensive, demeaning, and immature. The catcalls that I experienced there were all comments about my appearance. Being blonde in the USA is very common, but being blonde in Costa Rica is very unique and makes a person stand out. This experience was disorienting because I was constantly aware of the fact that I did not fit into the culture because of my hair color.

The situation in which this was the most apparent and made me the most uncomfortable was when I went to the mall with my host sister. Not much is different between shopping malls in Costa Rica and the United States besides the language. However, many Costa Ricans would

stare at me and some even pointed me out to the people that they were with. In addition to this, some people assumed that because I looked so different from them, that I didn't know or understand Spanish, and they talked about how light my hair was and how pale my skin was to the people they were with.

If I had reacted and called them out, I would have proven that I could indeed understand, but I would have negatively shown that I demanded to be accepted. In the United States, we are familiar with the unfamiliar because we have a wide array of people that live here. I learned that Costa Rica does not have the same diversity that we have, so an uncommon hair color would be peculiar to them. This made me realize that, had I reacted negatively to the people that were curious about my lighter hair color, I would have given off the impression that curiosity and interest is not welcome. One bad experience with one person can form stereotypes and opinions for an entire culture or country. This can potentially cause ridiculous stereotypes about different cultures that are globally misleading.

This experience is still hard for me to be able to put into words, even two months after returning. So much of what I learned and experienced in Costa Rica has become part of my life in the United States. Above all, I've become more appreciative of what I have. I know that I should not take things for granted, but remembering that every day is challenging. It's the littlest things that I have become more aware of in my life.

I'm thankful for the amazing roads and sidewalks that the United States has and the constant work and effort that goes into maintaining them. The sidewalks in Costa Rica, when there are any, are not well-maintained and can make walking along a busy highway very dangerous. Another daily aspect that I appreciate more now is clean drinking water that is available anywhere. Some mornings I would wake up and my host mom would tell me to not

drink the water that day because the pipes were dirty. Some mornings I would wake up and the water would be completely shut off. And most mornings the shower water was far from warm. Despite all the uncertainties that we faced, I embraced it as part of the culture. My host family never complained about any of it, so I knew that it was a common occurrence for them and that it would do me no good to worry either.

This photo is from the Basilica in Cartago. Inside this elaborate platform at the front of the church is a small stone in the shape of the Virgin holding her baby. La Virgen de los Angeles is very sacred to Costa Ricans, and they celebrate her as their patron saint on August 2nd by making the pilgrimage from their homes to the Basilica. Religion is very important in this country, and it was inspiring to see the adoration and respect of this place of faith.



These two ladies taught me so much about their country and were so friendly and welcoming to me. In the middle is my host sister Dilana and next to her is her neighbor Katarine. We took silly pictures, sang songs, danced, and played fútbol in the streets at night. They became my sisters during those two months, and I am so thankful for all that they did for me and cannot wait until I can see them again.

