Reflections on Global Village Trip to Guatemala

Our AmeriCorps VISTA member Kortney was one of 17 members on a Flatirons Habitat for Humanity Global Village Trip to Guatemala. The volunteers paid their own way to the country for the weeklong trip to build homes for two local families. In reflecting on her time there, Kortney shares it was not about doing something for those families, but doing it with them and watching their lives, and hers, change for the better. Here is her recap of the time in Guatemala:

If there is one thing I want to tell you about the trip to Guatemala it's this: Go.

There are experiences in this life that money simply cannot buy. I have traveled outside of the country a few times, and even studied abroad in Italy for five weeks, and there has yet to be a time I haven't

learned more about myself; but this trip tops them all. Most often, we find ourselves traveling for our own leisure -- to see beautiful places some people only dream of, wandering around the cities and towns taking in the beauty of a land distant from our home, only to have the time fly by and suddenly we are home, maybe no different than when we left. This trip certainly wasn't that experience.

To see a group of 17 people come together and use their resources to contribute to a greater good rather than personal gain is amazing. This group spent months coming together, getting to know each other, teaming up for a build day in Boulder for Flatirons Habitat for Humanity, and also spending time evaluating their individual motives for volunteering, particularly for this trip.

We spent time reading and talking about the book "Toxic Charity" to ask ourselves our purpose for committing to this trip; if the work we were doing was benefiting us, fulfilling our own needs for satisfaction in helping others, or if the commitment we were making was truly to provide our hands, hearts and resources in a way that assisted others without diminishing their dignity or creating a sense of helplessness. I can tell you the book made me fully evaluate my motives and to better understand how an act that appears to be so selfless and beneficial could potentially hurt communities and cultures when we fail to take a deeper look. We further discussed and understood the principals of Habitat for Humanity, and how it provides people with a "hand up" instead of a "hand-out," and allows a place for relationships to grow and lessons to be learned.

What did I learn?

I learned language barriers don't stop individuals from connecting. One of my favorite things I've noticed is that no matter where you find yourself in this world, you can always recognize a smile or a laugh. I might not understand your words, or what you're trying to tell me, but I somehow find there is always a way to make a connection.

I learned you can see the world in a whole different way when you provide your time, ability and resources to contribute to a country in ways outside of just touring it. You learn more about the families that call it home, you learn more about the dynamics and the culture, the values, the struggles they face and how they overcome them.

I learned there are different struggles all over the world, each unique to location and culture; and the more you travel and take a deeper look, the more the problems seem almost impossible to conquer. But the wisest statement I heard was that if you look to change the world, you'll be quickly discouraged. You'll find yourself overwhelmed, and a need that far outweighs your ability as an individual to conquer. But if you look to one individual, or only family, provide your hands, heart, sweat and resources in a meaningful way, you'll quickly start to see the world change for that one person. You'll see a life that will be forever altered; by not only changing their lives, but providing them with the opportunity to pass that change to their children, grandchildren and those around them.

My heart is forever changed by this experience, and that happened in 10 short days. I returned with a renewed sense of appreciation for simple things I often take for granted, such as an accessible supply of clean drinking water. I returned with a renewed outlook on the importance of the friends and family. I returned with images capturing the beautiful display of an entire country expressing it's faith during Holy Week, and the importance of this in their culture.

I returned with dirty hands, a sunburns and aching muscles, but a full heart after feeling so welcomed by the local Habitat affiliate, masons and families we worked alongside.

We came together despite our differences to accomplish one goal of assisting two families in accomplishing their dream of owning a home. We didn't do it for them; we did it with them.

See more of Kortney's photos from the trip on our Facebook page.