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## The Deborah M. Olsen Public Service Internship: The Colombian Refugee Project

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## The Deborah M. Olsen Public Service Internship 2015

Paulina Rodriguez

Returning to the United States after living seven months in South America introduced me to the reality of what I had been living. I thought I had a rough childhood but found out I was wrong. Looking back, my life has been a privilege based on my basic human needs having always been met, sometimes even in excess. Witnessing the living conditions that many Colombian refugees live was a slap to my face. I say this because I, an immigrant to the United States was naïve to think I was going to make a difference helping refugees in Quito; I definitely did not know exactly what I was getting myself into. Being an immigrant to the U.S. made me know the feeling of alienation, I thought I was going to find refugees who probably faced similar experiences, which I did, but theirs was far harsher than mine. This I realized when I interned at the Colombian Refugee Project, an ecumenical ministry shared between the Episcopal Church of Ecuador – Central Diocese and the Mennonite Church of Quito, Ecuador.

My task as an intern included experiencing first hand the conditions many of these refugees lived in. I, with another member of the organization, performed home visits to refugee families throughout different marginalized neighborhoods in the city of Quito. During these visits, we interviewed each family to better understand their situation and evaluate the type of need each family required. This information was then filed in the organization's records and those families with the most need or most vulnerable were priority in term of humanitarian aid. As well, I was in charge of buying, preparing and organizing humanitarian aid such as blankets, mattresses, food rations, stoves, gas tanks

and medicine which was distributed to different families once a week. In addition, because the organization in Quito in charge of this project was so understaffed, I also helped with data entry, made follow-up phone calls to families who were being served. I also accompanied those eligible for the small business initiative that the organization offered, to buy supplies for their business. Thus, this job, on top of being flexible definitely required me to be dedicated and compassionate while at the same time handling every task in a professional manner. Through this experience I learned a lot more about my self as well as how hard life can be in Quito, which was worse than I had expected.

Refugees suffer in many different ways; they are victims of xenophobia and are discriminated against on a daily basis based on their accents rather than appearance. For example, many will be denied housing or a job because of their nationality. Those who do find a job will sometimes be underpaid or not paid at all since they are in a vulnerable position based on their status. Not to mention, For Afro-Colombians the situation is worse due to racism. Knowing that everyday these realities go unnoticed makes me feel angry yet so impotent. I want to continue helping these groups of people but know that sending money alone will not solve the real issue. The problem is much bigger than donating a couple hundred dollars every once in a while. This is because money will help for the short-term but the problem will remain.

I have come to the conclusion that I want to do more than just help at a micro level. I want to make a change. To be able to do this I have to also work at a macro level, by pursuing a career in which I will have an influence on implementing policies. For this reason, I will apply to the Peace Corps so I can be placed to work in Colombia or

Ecuador. Once there, I hope to join a project that helps communities who are at the most risk of becoming refugees. Afterwards, I will go to graduate school and follow a career path in International Relations and such that relates to policy.

In addition, my experience abroad would have not been the same if it weren't for all the courses I completed before departing. I was able to use the analytical skills I gained in my Theory of Sociology course. Thanks to this class, I was able to use my sociological imagination, which was essential to my learning experience as I was able to approach situations from different perspectives. The intensive Spanish courses I took were also helpful because I went in being fluent in Spanish and fairly understood parts of the culture from some of the history I had previously learned. Therefore my experience in Ecuador would have probably not been as insightful as it turned out to be if it wasn't for the knowledge and skills I gained through my courses at Linfield College.

My experience abroad definitely helped me reflect on my life, my position in society and the steps I need to take in order to keep moving forward. Its startling to know that many of us tend to live such comfortable lifestyles that we have the tendency to forget about the realities others are living since we do not consider them our own. I do not want this to happen to me which is why I will never forget my experience in Quito and use it as a way to remind me what my mission in life is, which is that to help others.