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Postcards from Abroad

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## Adventures in Tena

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## Adventures in Tena



*The Timmy group on the last clinic day.*

I can't believe I'm only 8 days away from the conclusion of this incredible study abroad experience. For this blog post I'm going back in time about a month to talk about what was, without a doubt, the BEST week of my time here in Ecuador.

At the beginning of this semester all international students at USFQ received an email from Veronica in the International Programs Office letting us know of an opportunity to serve as English-Spanish translators for various health clinics through an organization called Timmy Global Healthcare. As a nursing student this opportunity immediately appealed to me. I quickly emailed a letter of interest with a bit of my background, had a phone "interview" with Arianna, one of the program directors, and I was in!

About a month later I was calling a taxi at 7am to take me an hour away (past my university in Cumbaya) to a Puenbo hostel to meet with the rest of the group of medical professionals, volunteers and translators and board a 5-hour bus to the Napo province. I was nervous and excited all at once--my first Ecuadorian excursion without the safety blanket of my Oregon group. I quickly found the other translators (the group of college age kids sort of loitering outside also unsure what to do/where to go as the medical professionals and volunteer who had spent the night at the hostel finished their breakfasts). Cecelia and Evan were both Americans from USFQ like me while Luis, Paul, Rommy and Denisse were Ecuadorians studying medicine at UDLA, another university in Quito. As the two American girls and only non-native Spanish speakers of the group, Cecelia and I quickly became attached at the hip and got to know each other pretty well during the 5 hour bus ride to the jungle town of Tena.

We arrived around mid-day, unpacked the bus, moved into our cabins at the beautiful Establo de Toma hostel and settled in for orientation and lunch. Though the orientation was a bit overwhelming I felt secure in the fact that I had already been living in Ecuador for three months while the volunteers and medical professionals had only been in the country for around 24 hours. The group included 4 providers and 2 nurses as well as a large group of volunteers and a group of Timmy Global Healthcare employees living in Ecuador. From the very moment we stepped on the bus I could tell how special this group of people was. It was a unique Timmy brigade in that, instead of being filled with college student volunteers from a

university chapter in the states, it was entirely Microsoft employee volunteers. Microsoft has some sort of relationship with Timmy based on a former Timmy employee who now works for Microsoft and has been recruiting volunteers over the years. Now, the majority of this group had been on the same Timmy brigade to the jungle communities surrounding Tena for years meaning this group of people wasn't just a group of people, but a family – a family which I feel extremely lucky to have been welcomed into over the course of the week. (Note: because they are all Microsoft employees, the majorities are also from the PNW, which made it feel even more like home).

We arrived on a Saturday and then had five clinic days: Sunday, Monday, Tuesday, Thursday and Friday, with Wednesday as a break day and the second Saturday as a travel/explore Quito day. Each clinic day we hauled our supplies from the hostel in Tena as far as 2 hours away to remote, impoverished communities deep within the Ecuadorian jungle by bus, truck, and ferry. We were each assigned to a station for the day: history, lab/triage, scribe/runner, pharmacy or fluoride/kiddie patrol. In addition, we each had a box of supplies that we needed to inventory and restock each day after clinic to ensure that we had sufficient supplies packed and ready to go each morning. I had the good fortune to be both working in lab/triage every day (except one) AND to be assigned to the lab/triage supply box.

I loved every single minute of lab/triage. We had an RN and a group of around six or seven volunteers each day. Two or three people would work on the computers entering vitals and lab results into patients' charts in Timmy's electronic medical records system (Note: how INCREDIBLE is it that we had an electronic medical records system in the middle of the jungle--it was actually written by a Microsoft employee on one of the previous Microsoft brigades), we had one or two volunteers with each patient (two patients at a time) taking heart rate and blood pressure, temperature, height and weight while the RN supervised and I moved from patient to patient helping to translate between the RN and volunteers and the patient. We also had a lab station set up where we could take glucose and hemoglobin readings and do pregnancy and urine-analysis tests. This was my domain. For some reason, no one else was all that excited to deal with patients' urine but I was all over it. The first day of clinic, Kathleen (one of the RNs) taught me how to do the urine-analysis and pregnancy tests (I wasn't allowed to prick anyone's fingers to do the glucose or hemoglobin tests), as well as how to listen to a baby's heartbeat, among other things. From that day on I took over the lab station when I wasn't helping to translate and I loved it. It was this feeling of knowing exactly what to do, and being in control, feeling needed, and just generally being in my element. I also loved loved loved working with the patients, especially the babies and small children. Despite being extremely impoverished communities, the majority of the people I met and interacted with seemed genuinely content, other than having a lack of basic medical services. The feeling of not only being able to help them in a medical way but also interact with them on a personal level using my Spanish skills was incredible--it absolutely confirmed my decision to extend my time at Linfield by a semester in order to come to Ecuador. Beyond that, it really made me even more interested in doing something like Timmy or Peace Corps or Doctors without Borders after I graduate.

The only day I didn't work in lab/triage was the third clinic day (Tuesday) following an unfortunately extreme reaction to bug bites I obtained the first day of clinic. By Monday evening I had a one-inch ring around my ankles of swollen red bites (the only exposed skin I had between my socks and pants the first day of clinic). I could barely walk the aching pain was so severe. After dinner on Monday one of the medical providers injected each individual bite with anti-histamine to help the swelling and pain. It worked like a charm but hurt like crazy in the moment. More than anything on this trip, that experience confirmed to me the family that was the Micro-Timmy group. I had about six people around me bringing me tissues, water, trying to distract me, holding my hand, etc. while I sat there and received the injections (with as few tears as possible). The next day I got the chance to put my feet up and work in pharmacy translating and printing labels. While I missed the excitement and patient interaction of lab/triage, I am also a sucker for organization and efficiency, which is pharmacy to a "t". I enjoyed the fans, snacks, music, computer work, and the footstool for my swollen ankles, but was equally as excited to hear I was going back to lab/triage the next day.

More than anything, this experience taught me a lot about myself--my ability to survive and to work hard in almost 100 degree heat with intense humidity and vicious bugs for hours and absolutely LOVE it, my

ability to develop amazing family relationships with total strangers despite my introverted nature, my ability to speak Spanish in a professional setting, and my love, genuine interest in, and predisposition for medicine and nursing. I'm so unbelievably grateful to have had this opportunity, it was by far the best experience of my time here in Ecuador and I would do anything to go back to that week and experience it all over again. I don't know when or how, but I know that one day I'll return to Timmy (and hopefully Micro-Timmy) because I have to, because it meant so much to me, and because I now understand what one long-time volunteer meant when she said the first day that she's a "Timmy addict" because it's such an incredible organization and the people and communities Timmy serves are so amazing it's addicting.

Haley