

Jardines de Colon trip January, 2017

For many years I have supported the Sister Community Fund by writing my yearly check. It was a very peripheral involvement. I had no interest in sponsoring a specific student or in trying to write letters. "I don't speak Spanish" was my excuse. In the summer of 2016 my perception of the program changed after several conversations with Ron Fettig and after hearing about Jessica Johnson's visit to Jardines de Colon in 2016. So, when the request came for volunteers to visit, I signed up.

Then I got nervous. What if I could not communicate and it felt awkward? What if I hated the food or got sick? What if the people were so poor and sad that I felt only sorrow and embarrassed by my comfortable life? What if the temperature was so hot I suffered heat stroke and could not access adequate health care? What if I got kidnapped and held for ransom? I am not usually a worrier but after volunteering for this trip, I started to question my decision. But I followed the weather forecast and packed accordingly. I brought boxes of granola bars which I never had to eat! Mostly, I avoided having any real expectations, trusted the Lord and decided to see what happened.

I am so very glad I did! When people ask me about the trip, my first admission is that I had fun! Most people hope to have fun on a vacation but I did not consider this a vacation. So to experience fun, friendship, satisfaction, humility and thanksgiving, it was nothing but a very wonderful experience.

My first impression of the families and students is how happy they all seem. Everyone smiles, says hello, giving lots of hugs and handshakes. This happens every time you meet someone and when saying goodbye. It is a good thing I like to hug! A few of the teenagers have studied English and can speak quite well, but most of the folks only speak Spanish and our interpreter, Eduardo Montes, could not be everywhere at once! I would say the majority of our communication was through smiles. We did not understand each other, but as long as there was a smile, it felt right. The families are so caring and generous. Some of them survive on less than \$300 a month, yet opened their homes to us for lunch and dinner. We saw chickens running around the yard and knew one had been killed for our lunch. The lemonade we drank was also

made from lemons growing in the yard. Running water and electricity are in all the homes, but flush toilets are not. Another surprising thing is that prices are the same or more expensive there, yet their income is so small. Few of the families have cars and most travel by bus. We spent one afternoon with a group of women who visit the sick and elderly. Some of the ill rely on donations of food and money to survive.

The students are required to provide service to the community as a requirement of their scholarships. We witnessed a beautiful example of cooperation and fellowship as they prepared for an evening of entertainment. All afternoon the students helped each other practice dances, decorate the stage, put out chairs for seating, hung lights and streamers and always with a smile and willingness that was wonderful to see. And then we got to see authentic dances and costumes, a reenactment of the Manger Scene and we were included in the final dance of the show! Very fun! On Sunday afternoon, Fr. Chris said Mass in Spanish to a huge crowd that filled the chapel. The people just kept coming and somehow they found more and more chairs. It was a joyful celebration.

I learned so much while on the trip. The Sister Community Fund started about 20 years ago as a way to send scholarships to students in Jardines de Colon. Even grade school students benefit from scholarships. Gangs are very strong in El Salvador and the teenagers feel pressure to join as a way to belong, have money and status, and to save their families from harm. The hope is that by helping teenagers stay in school and advance their education, they will avoid the gang influence, get good jobs and give back to the community which makes it stronger and able to resist the pressure of the gangs. Our final night there was a dinner shared with many of the families and students. Five graduates gave testimonials that they would not have been able to complete their education without the help of the fund. Two of the graduates are lawyers and we supported them with scholarships through law school. They have stayed connected to the community and are trying to help others.

Each day we met and interviewed students and their families. Eduardo would ask questions and then translate the answers. We met a teenager named Henry, who is deaf. His grandmother drives him to and from a

special school on the other side of San Salvador. He is one of the top students at his school but would not be able to attend without our financial help. Alejandro is living with his grandmother, as his parents are dead. We sponsor Fabiola, whose mother and brother were killed by the gangs. She wants to study English because it will allow her to work more places. Rubi is an adorable 9 year old who is learning English at her school. During our lunch at her home, she brought out her notebooks and practiced her English. Gabriela is in her last year of college to be a teacher. Monica and Kerin want to be doctors. We met engineering students, business students, computer science students. It was amazing to finally have faces and names to go with my donation and to see proof that my donation does make a difference.

It is also clear that we need additional funding. There are currently 30 scholarship students. This is far less than the 46 scholarships we were able to provide in the past. There could be no new scholarships this year. This is very disappointing to me and to the families in Jardines de Colon. I now feel connected to Jardines de Colon, almost like they are family. I find myself wishing I could text or email and get an update. This seems like the relationship Ron Fettig and Eduardo Montes also share with the families. They have been there enough that there is a true friendship. Ron would ask about the health of a parent or about the career path of a past student. The students were excited to see Ron as he always brings candy!

My hope is to stay connected to the families and students of Jardines de Colon, certainly through continued financial support, but also on a more personal level. Perhaps I will visit again and experience the joyful smiles and hugs that greeted me the first time. I would love updates about the students: Where is Gabriela teaching? Is Henry now in college? How is Rubi's English? I would be happy to share my story with anyone personally and encourage others to prayerfully consider donating to the scholarship fund. **Your donation will make a difference.**

Dr. Ellen Kellogg