Guatemala Reflection Essay

Gabe Kawamura

Senior, Windsor High School

Windsor, Colorado

Spending a week in a foreign country will give you an appreciation for its’ culture, revealing more than what is just at the surface, and Guatemala truly is not the exception. Something was different about this place than all the other countries I have been to. I noticed it on my very first sight of Guatemala, looking out the window of my plane. Rolling hills cover the land like green grass covers a lawn. It is everywhere and shapes the locations of farmland, traditional Mayan villages, and urban areas such as Guatemala City and Antigua where our journey began.

I could not wait to see the group again for the first time since our trip to Pine Ridge Indian Reservation in South Dakota last summer. When they came through the airport doors, it was a reunion. Alex, one of our in-country operators, took us to the Hotel Burkhard in the city of Antigua. Being an UNESCO World Heritage Site, Antigua has cobblestone streets and Mayan ruins that show the ancient cultural influence. I thought it was really cool to be in a town that predated the oldest towns of the United States.

On the first day, we took a short hike up to an iconic point in Antigua; an ancient cross overlooking the city. There were numerous photo opportunities of Antigua in its entirety and a great view of Guatemala’s largest volcano. Everyone was snapping pictures, posing for pictures, and having a great time.

It was sunny and hot and ideal for coffee to grow. Our tour of the coffee plantation was a very in-depth tour where we saw the entire process of preparing coffee from start to finish. There are many steps in processing the coffee and it is very time consuming. During this tour Landon took his most acclaimed photo, and it could not be outdone for the remainder of the trip.

While we were at the coffee plantation, we were able to hear about fair trade coffee. Carlos, previous head of the Peace Corps in Guatemala, talked to us about fair trade coffee. I learned that fair trade organizations can charge more for their products because the fair trade status attracts certain buyers who will be willing to pay extra for something that is fairly traded. These organizations also give their employees higher pay and better working conditions like union rights. The benefits are not only received by the workers, but by the communities as well. The extra money the employees receive can be spent on things like sending their kids to school. More money going to these workers also keeps it in the community, and that money recycles, going in and out of everyone’s pocket instead of going straight to the owner of the plantation.

That reminds me of something that Alex said about all of the mudslides that are happening on the sides of the roads. He said that Guatemala, having as much unlevel land as it does, depends on the trees to soak up and slow down the rainfall water as it runs down the hills. But so many people are cutting down the trees to make space for corn fields that the rainfall runs straight through those fields and creates mudslides. This is like money recycling through the community. The more trees it goes through, the stronger the community is, but if the trees are cut out, the money is the mudslide that goes straight into the owner’s pocket.

Fair trade does have a downside. It is expensive, and businesses that are just starting out will have trouble attaining that fair trade title. This is because the workers have to be paid the appropriate amount and the infrastructure is a whole different model. This can prove to be difficult for small businesses, which is why fair trade is not effective for everyone.

Even with drawbacks for smaller businesses or start-up companies, I can see that the benefits of fair trade majorly outweigh the negatives. It promotes economic development because it introduces more money into the communities that can be used to pay for school and pay for crops that can be eaten or sold-- all this can happen while the money stays in the community.

Arriving back in Antigua was like a culture shock. Just a few minutes ago we were in a quiet and lush oasis, and now we are back in the bustling city with merchants unhesitantly stepping up to make a sale. A little extra time allowed us to walk through the town’s central park; music, food, merchants, sounds, smells, and Toyotas rattling by on the cobblestone.

I noticed that the merchants did not ever try to make a sale to the locals. Not one. They would hang around us touristy folk. I came to the realization that the locals depended on the tourists to make their sales. It was their goal to sell something that tourists wanted and something that could only be bought in Guatemala. Without the tourists, these people would be out of business, so tourism absolutely contributes to economic stability in Guatemala. A lot of the locals that receive microfinance loans open up small shops that target tourists with items like bracelets, Minions, and cool Guatemalan shoes. I admit to buying all of those things because Guatemala’s the only place where I can get items of that sort, and that’s their corner on the market.

We were given the opportunity to visit a microfinance loan organization where some of those merchants undoubtedly got their funding from. Namaste is an impressive microfinance loan organization that has a successful process for issuing loans to women with a mere interest rate of 2%. A small loan will be given in each cycle of this process. There are three cycles of nine months each, for a total of 27 months. After their third cycle, the women can get a larger loan of around $1,000 USD.

This is a great opportunity for women to start a business not only from the loans, but more importantly from what they learn. Namaste teaches the women business and financial skills in their cycles, and every summer all of the women go to a big conference to continue their education in business and finance. In their ten years, Namaste has aided 2,000 women. Employees of Namaste seek out women to help, going straight to their doors instead of waiting for them to ask for help. Men are not aided here because women are usually more family-oriented and they commit their money to their children’s education. With that, the future generation grows stronger.

Namaste, along with other microfinance organizations, are valuable to Guatemala because they empower individuals by placing value on cultural items and the art of crafting them. Valuing cultural items also means gaining an appreciation of the culture itself, and preserving it.

A piece of the age-old culture that we were able to see was the Mayan ruins of Iximche. I have always wanted to visit an ancient Mayan ruin, so this was really interesting to me. We learned all about ancient Mayan beliefs and culture as we walked around the ruins. Walking among the buildings where people once walked hundreds of years ago took me back in time. Nature seemed to defy its laws in Iximche; giant trees grew atop buildings and structures were intact with some of the paintings still on the walls. Iximche has not been fully excavated yet, so there are still more secrets hidden in this time capsule.

A four-hour drive took us to Panajachel, home of many things including Adigua, Mayan Families, IMAP, and Lake Atitlan. Every restaurant had a great lakeside view with volcanoes towering over on the other side.

The first microfinance organization we visited in the Lake Atitlan area was Adigua. A larger organization, Adigua puts their clients first, and they try to make a welcoming environment in their offices. The employees don’t wear suits, but casual clothes and their reception desk is right behind the front door. This creates an unintimidating feel that makes their clients feel more comfortable. Adigua employees often travel by motorcycle to their clients’ homes to meet with them. Consultation and education is also given to Adigua’s clients based on what skills and knowledge they need for their business.

The next organization we visited was Mayan Families. Run by volunteers, this nonprofit gives people of Mayan descent almost everything they need. Their motto is Educate, Feed, Shelter, Heal and they have departments in each one. Perhaps the best part of Mayan Families is that even those who cannot afford the services are sponsored. For example, 2,600 students are being sponsored so that they can go to school.

Mayan Families emphasizes the importance of introducing the Spanish language at a young age because the majority of the children in the rural areas speak one of the 22 Mayan languages. Research done by Mayan Families shows that the success rate of kindergarteners with no Spanish is 30% but with Spanish is 96%.

Mayan Families also offers medical care for the students and all their families, and conducts a wide range of programs like an orphan’s program, mother and infant’s program, and children with disabilities program, just to name a few. Sewing classes hugely benefit the women because they learn how to make things that they can sell.

Overall, Mayan Families is an impressive organization that can benefit the entire city of Panajachel. More so, the computer education class can open up many job opportunities around Guatemala for these people.

On our last day, we had breakfast at a restaurant with an amazing view of the lake. Looming in the background was a series of three volcanoes shrouded in the mist. They revealed themselves as the mist cleared, and the true enormity of these fiery mounts made clear that this lake is a crater, and the water is from rain. After centuries of rain accumulation, this 50 square mile lake has filled so high with water; light cannot pass through to the bottom.

Little did we know that we were going to the base of that volcano by boat. The difference between the sides of the lake is like two different worlds. One side has a city, the other has a jungle. IMAP is the Mesoamerican Permaculture Institute, and their focus is on environmentally friendly farming. A system for farming that the Mayans use is planting corn, beans, and squash all together to make a symbiotic relationship that maximizes yield and minimizes pests. At IMAP, they are fully utilizing their natural resources not only for food but for compost too, and while creating no waste.

Seeing all of the microfinance organizations gave me a new understanding of how microfinance loans are used to promote health and education, enrich lives, and uplift communities. Despite the use of microfinance, there is still deep poverty in Guatemala. The language barrier between the 22 Mayan languages and Spanish cut off almost all communication between Mayan communities and individuals who don’t speak their language. Gender inequality sets women back on many bases. Women have no purchasing power and are not as educated. Women do not get paid as much as men, so they must find other jobs, which is hard because of discrimination. Traditions contribute to poverty also because it is traditional for boys and girls to do specific jobs for their families rather than to go to school, as there is no value in education. Finally, government corruption plays a role in creating poverty because the money stays in the pockets of the corrupt politicians and companies who fund them. Little to no funding is given to the labor force or to the small business owners. The conglomeration of these issues is why there is unwavering poverty in Guatemala.

It was a long trip back to Guatemala City, and before I knew it, it was time to say goodbye. It got emotional quick, knowing that the end was approaching our journey together. These memories will never fade; the groups and the country are things I will always remember. And as soon as it started, it came to an end.