Liesel Theusch

Guatemala Orphanage Volunteer & Host Family Experience

Week 1

Competency: Global Citizenship ~ Self-Awareness Level 3: Recognizing/comparing/contrasting cultural rules and biases

 After 2 full days of travel, I was finally introduced to my host family here in Guatemala and met 2 other volunteers that were staying here. These girls were both Pre-Med students from California that were volunteering in a hospital here. I did not talk with them much since they would say hello to the family when they returned from class and the hospital then go directly to their room. On the second night I got to talk with them after supper and asked for suggestions on where to shop, travel, wash clothes, etc. anything that I might need to know for my 2-month stay. They proceeded to say that there was not much to do, it wasn’t safe, and the family very much kept to themselves. After speaking with my contact and mom here I got a completely different story. The alternative version was that there was plenty to do if you were willing to try new experiences and returned home before 10pm. The interaction with the girls made me realize that they did not know about all the opportunities because of their acceptance of the California norm where services and transportation in particular are highly more developed than here in Guatemala. My mom here explained that when they first arrived they expected a service similar to cleaning and room service. They did not expect to be a part of the family.

In Guatemala, there is a very strong sense of family and community. Coming from a strong family environment and small-town community in Minnesota, this made my transition easier. I came into this experience prepared to interact and assist the family which made the mom very welcoming and the beginning of my experience very positive. This contrasts to the other volunteers’ experience where they expected to simply rent a room and be served at home. In California, when one pays for essentially a boarding service this may be the case, but Guatemala is different. When these girls left they called out a goodbye as the family ate lunch and left the keys on the table. No hugs or thank yous. This was ultimately hurtful because of all the family members’ efforts to make their stay enjoyable and they did not receive a hint of gratitude since the room and food had been paid for through our program fees. Between Guatemala, Minnesota, and California there are many cultural differences and the responsibility is shared by all to be conscious and adjust to these differences. In this specific case, the responsibility was not shared and some parties became offended as a consequence.