

Dear friends and family,

Finally I am able to take a little bit of time to reflect about Costa Rica. It was an amazing time, and I know I could write a book easily of my experiences and emotions on the trip. First off, I have been so blessed to be able to travel so much and seen so many things. Experiencing another culture, especially one that fits like second skin, is wonderful. Like with Brazil, I left Costa Rica feeling as though I had left a part of my heart there.

It was a marvelous adventure in love. My team went down to Costa Rica from March 28th to April 4, 2009 to visit CCA, a church in Alajuelita that Northshore partners with. The pastor Alberto and his wife Rocio are so dear to me. They have such a love and tenderness for the people. The ministries stemming from the church are vast and designed to decrease misery, not eradicate poverty, Jesus said that we will always have the poor among us, but the church desires to share that Jesus cares for the people and shows them by easing the misery. We saw so many people in desperate situations, yet it was also plain to see the hope they had; hope for a better life and hope in Jesus.

My heart was tied up with the people at each place we visited. Monday we toured the school that serves children from kindergarten to high school. The church offers some scholarships so that children from all backgrounds can attend and get a solid education. There is also a café there that serve amazing nutritious food. We then visited the Senior Center with about 10 to 15 men in their 70's to 80's. Rocio shared how their families had abandoned them and these men had no where else to go. The men shared their stories with us and I felt an instant connection with them. Monday afternoon we went to Jazmin, a very poor town in the area, and were able to pass out food boxes to ten families. We also had two of the children on our team passing out lollipops while the parents passed out toothbrushes. One of the families showed us their food supplies before we came- literally a handful of rice and a handful of beans, and that was it. It was incredible to be part of the solution. Although the people in Jazmin did not have grand houses and SUVs, they take pride in what they have and graciously offered us hospitality and a peek into their lives.

Tuesday we visited the men's and women's shelters which house more than 60 individuals combined who are seeking to live a life free of their addictions and abundant in Christ. We prayed with them and heard their stories. I even got to practice my Spanish with some newfound friends. Many of the individuals we met started using drugs around 12 years old, and living on the streets at 9! We met a man who shared that he started using drugs when he was 4 years old. The people there are so determined to break out of the cycle of addiction. It was so inspiring. After that we lunched at the church and then bought some food for lunch at the feeding center on Wednesday. We went back to our hotel and made

gift bags for tomorrow, then attended the evening church service.

Wednesday and Thursday we went to the children's feeding center. The church feeds anywhere from 60 to 120 children a day. Some children walk long distances every day to receive this meal, which may be the only meal they get a day. We painted the benches and the tables that the children sit on. Some of the children wanted to help and we all got paint all over us. I also got to help out in the kitchen and practiced my Spanish. God bless the women who work so tirelessly there! We also visited HiperMas, which is the Central American Walmart.

Friday was a tour day- we traveled to see crocodiles and walk through a rainforest. It was so beautiful. We had lunch by the sea and I ordered fish- it came with the head still attached, and I almost didn't know what to do with it. It was delicious though, and I shared my meal with some of the cats and dogs at the restaurant. Touring through the rainforest we saw several lizards, monkeys, and scarlet macaws.

As with all the other trips I have been on, the most important thing that stuck with me was the relationships that we have formed and the bonds we have made, not only with the people on the team, but also the people in Costa Rica. The people there are so loving and friendly. They greet you with a kiss on the cheek and a hug, which I could totally get used to! We got to know our bus driver Jonathan pretty well. At first we only said hello and good bye when getting on or off the bus... but I started thinking that interacting and practicing my Spanish with him would be a good thing. Granted, on Tuesday night I asked if he wanted to dance (I wanted to know if he LIKED to dance but used the wrong word), but we kept trying to communicate and built a friendly bantering back and forth. On Thursday night he shared about some problems he was having and I was able to ask him if he had a bible and I wrote down some verses for him. It was an awesome reminder to me that it's okay if I don't have the language down pat; it's about communication and sharing the love of Christ. And people can understand when you share love; love surpasses every language boundary.

Thank you to everyone who supported me on this trip, both financially and with prayer. You are all vital in my growth and encouragement. I hope you feel a part of this experience; you were with me every step of the way!

In Jesus,

Julie