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Building Better Health: Habitat for Humanity Guatemala

Portia Eastman

University of Rhode Island, portiaroseeastman@gmail.com

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Portia Eastman

Honors Project

Building Better Health: Habitat for Humanity Guatemala

My initial goal for my project was to take an international service trip to assess the health benefits of having a healthy home and a smokeless stove in low-income families in Guatemala. While both those things did happen on the trip, the learning outcomes for myself and the team ended up in two different directions. For the team, I'd hope they would gain firsthand experience into the differences between our health systems and the ones in place in third world countries. I wanted them to start combining what they had learned in class to what they were seeing daily to making connections between the benefits of having a healthy home and living a healthy life. Myself, on the other hand, I started to realize the immense work that went into planning health-based service projects and how crucial it is to the overall success and longevity of the project itself. While it is one thing to get volunteers to places and complete projects, it is another to help the volunteers appropriately enter, engage, and exit the community correctly while completing projects that involve the community and will benefit the community in the long-term. Before the trip, I spent a lot of time learning how to lead a team into a community and how to do it correctly. When first entering a community, it is all about listening and learning. You must have an understanding of what has worked, what has not, and the history of the area. Then comes self-reflection, it is important to have a strong sense of your own experiences, biases, and social identity. It is crucial to teach volunteers to understand that how they portray themselves might not be how others view them, especially in an area where they might not resemble the local people. When you are engaging in a community it is all about being gracious and building relationships. Our team talked about cultural humility and cultural competence before leaving for this trip. It was important in my learning objectives that these students realize they have so much to learn and to always be paying attention. Lastly, exiting a community is always about sustainability, whether it be sustaining the change you've made in yourself, the change you've made in the community, or the change you've made upon the issue at hand. Overall, long-term positive change is the goal with the individual, community, and issue level.

I was directly involved in the creation, advertising, recruiting, planning, fundraising, and action of this trip. It took about 2 ½ years to get everything in place and to get all students signed up and ready. I was able to bring 7 URI students and 1 faculty member with me on this trip which took place in January 2017. We were there for 9 days and were able to build 1 home and 2 smokeless stoves while also taking advantage of every cultural activity that we could. Our team was able to work day in and day out with the local masons and their families. We ate meals together and while there might have been a language barrier between us, we started to be comfortable with each other's faces and presence. This was a huge aspect of the trip, cultural immersion. I had never been able to afford to study abroad or participate in any faculty-led trips, so being able to travel and be of service to Habitat for Humanity was perfect. I wanted to make sure my trip was both mentally and physically challenging, culturally immersive, a learning experience, and inexpensive. Overall, the trip was extremely successful. We were able to connect with the locals on a level which allowed massive amounts of work to get done. If anything, the

students were placed in a real-life situation where issues of health needed fixing and they were able to work together with the team and the local community to find a solution.

As for the future, if this trip were to continue on as a school sanctioned trip, it would go much smoother with a team to handle the planning and the support of the school. I have laid the groundwork and have the bones of the trip planned already with an understanding of how international service trips work. As was the intention in the first place, I hope to make this trip become an Alternative Spring Break Trips because I understand firsthand the impact that those trips have on students and the growth that can be made from traveling internationally to be in service to others.