Margaret Desmond

We arrive after dark. The long day of airports and airplanes fades into the warm night. And we notice the smell, an ineffable sweet smell of the tropics that could never exist on the streets of New York. Pulling up to the hotel, we exclaim over each detail excited to have arrived at last: the persistent chirping of the birds, the large bright flowers, and the warm night air. We have come here looking for something though I am not sure we know exactly what we hope to find.

Sugarcane fields pass by the windows of the bus. We wander through tropical botanical gardens where the tools from past centuries for extraction of the sugarcane juice are displayed. The history of the region distilled for us to see in a few hours. What are we looking for here? What am I looking for here?

Our bus drives down city streets. The houses are caged in bars with spiral staircases leading from the second floor to the street. I’ve never seen so many people riding motorcycles. A family goes by on a bicycle: a mother, a father, and two kids on a single bike. We stand in front of Cristo Rey and look out over Cali. We eat empanadas and drink lulada. I try chontaduro with honey and salt. One day we drive outside of the city, upward to an area where stray dogs roam the streets. The “clinic” is a roof over the space where we watch medical students teach some elderly members of the community about nutrition. At the university, we talk to medical students. We play brain awareness week games. We practice CPR. We get to see the simulation hospital and then try our hand at intubation and lumbar punctures. One student from an indigenous community talks about his experience. We are so curious about this interaction between Western and indigenous medical practices.

At Club Noel, we walk through the halls of a pediatric hospital. We see babies lying in hospital beds with their parents looking down at them, worry etched in their faces. We peer through doorways, the curious Americans. Some of us speak with a mother. She is one year younger than me, studying to be a nurse. Her baby recovering from a high fever. It will take her three hours by bus to get home. We met a seventeen year old, far from home. He is studying to be a nurse, but he forgot his medication for anemia. He doesn’t like to take it anyway.

At a much larger hospital, we put on scrubs for the chance to step into an operating room during a procedure. We are guided through the ICU and informed in a hushed voice about the conditions of each patient. What were we looking for in each of these places? Did we find it?
I know that I’ve already forgotten some of the events over the week. Memory is funny that way. But while all these experiences are the sum of my time in Colombia, but they can’t capture what it really was. The emergent properties are much more than the sum of the parts. We were not looking for any of this. We were looking for all of this. That is the beauty of cultural immersion.

For me, the best part was to have conversations with medical students and patients, to just talk with people in a new context. These conversations reminded me why I love medicine because I love people and interacting with them.

Medicine is a calling based in service for me. It is hard for me to say exactly what this time in Colombia means to me. I did not become an expert on the healthcare system. In a year or two, I probably will not remember much of how the Colombian health insurance system functions. Maybe the Spanish I practiced speaking will help me out in the future. But what is the lasting impact of this trip? The impact of this trip for me is more subtle. Being in another country reminded me why I love medicine. Every person needs to be healthy. Regardless of nationality, culture, age, gender, language - health is universal. Sometimes I need to be reminded that medicine exists outside of the United States. The world is vast and I am not the center of the universe. I will always remember this time studying the healthcare system of Colombia for a week when I could experience another culture, talk with people, and remember why I wanted to study medicine in the first place.