Carla Romney

Cali, Colombia was a place that conjured up images of drug cartels, extremes of wealth and poverty, and wonderfully warm weather instead of the ravages of one of the toughest winters in the history of meteorological recordkeeping in northeastern United States. I was fortunate to be chosen to lead a group of Fordham College at Rose Hill (FCRH) undergraduates on a journey to explore public health, medicine, and medical education in Cali in March, 2015.

Our journey to Cali began months before our arrival. I considered the aims of the trip and wanted my students to conduct research and have a means to engage with the people they met. I wanted the students to experience the culture, food, and language of Cali through the eyes of their peers and through the varied lenses of medical school faculty, public health practitioners, and Colombians going about their day-to-day lives- whether they were in cafes, markets, schools, or medical clinics and hospitals in the Valle de Cauca region. I wanted to challenge the students to question their assumptions about allopathic medicine as it is practiced in the U.S., and I was most interested in having them reflect on their own desires to serve as physicians.

I selected a group of 5 female and 2 male students from a variety of backgrounds, heritages, native/family languages, and dietary practices to join me on this expedition. I also wanted to explore medicine, public health, and medical education in an integrative way.

In my career, I have been exposed to these fields sequentially but haven’t had a synthetic experience that forced me to tie them together. My position at FCRH affords me the opportunity to think about how we prepare the next generation of scientists, engineers, and health professionals. I stress the importance of immersion in foreign languages and cultures, fine arts, music, humanities, and social sciences. I appreciate the value of these varied disciplinary perspectives as I immerse myself in my overfilled plate of activities and projects. I hoped that my experience in Cali would reinforce the value of these fields in making us interesting and engaging teachers, health professionals, and leaders.

Our experience at Pontificia Universidad Javeriana (PUJ) Facultad de Ciencias de la Salud was extraordinary. We witnessed the Jesuit teaching of Pedro Arrupe, S.J., “men (and women) for others”, in practice under straitened conditions. The students, faculty members, and community members shared a vision and passion for improving the lives of others, without regard for recompense or personal gain.
We learned about the challenges of implementing a tiered health insurance system that seeks to provide health care for all, but its impact is limited to those who can access it and those who can pay more to utilize the private healthcare system. We learned that even impoverished communities seek better healthcare in a linguistically and culturally attuned setting from providers who genuinely exude empathy and have the means to make a difference in their lives. We connected with community members, patients, and educators and transcended the differences in our own backgrounds and languages. In essence, we learned that we have much more in common than we might have thought. I hope that this is the beginning of an enduring relationship between the faculties and students of PUJ and FCRH. We have much to teach each other and much to learn from one another. Most importantly, we must consider how we can work together to build bridges that can improve human health and wellbeing by eradicating social injustice, prejudice, and misunderstanding of people from different backgrounds and traditions. Colombia is working to move beyond its violent past through recent efforts to create a lasting peace with the guerillas, so it is poised to become an exemplar in demonstrating to a global audience how to realize improved health through marshaling its resources in education, public health, and medicine.