
“Me llamo Sarah...”

Sarah Breger

The colors in Tegucigalpa must have been vibrant twenty years ago. But now blankets of dust and poverty cover the capital city of Honduras and its 775,300 residents. Houses and buildings pile on top of each other as garbage blows in the wind through the narrow spaces between them. No one follows traffic laws, and pedestrians constantly and emphatically dart in and out of roadways.

As you exit the city, the colors slowly change. Driving past mountain-like piles of thrown-out soda bottles, teal and pink houses begin to sprout up as the population slowly thins. The land becomes lush and green. Signs appear on the side of the road with the words “Jesus Presidente” (“Jesus for president”) and a herd of skinny cows stops traffic. Soon these disappear as well and the semi-paved roads end. Now there are only dirt paths that wind around mountains and great pine trees in terrain where only four wheel drives or tenacious villagers dare to travel.

After all of this, the village of San Antonio appears. A red and white sign, cracked in half and partially covered by trees, declares a Nueva Agenda. This is a village into which cars rarely enter and everyone lives below the poverty line. It is a village with no electricity, where sixth grade is the highest level of possible education. It is a village whose sons and daughters yearn for America but will most likely remain in the village to raise children and farm the land.

San Antonio, and its five hundred families, is not an exception in Honduras but a rule. With 53 percent of its inhabitants living below the

poverty line, Honduras is one of the poorest developing countries in the world. Honduras, the original Banana Republic, has been ravaged by the machinations of the United Fruit Company, corrupt leaders, and more recently in 1998 by Hurricane Mitch. AIDS is one of the biggest killers in Honduras and with inadequate healthcare or sanitized water, disease can easily spread.

I, along with 15 other college students, came for one week to San Antonio to save it from itself. Or, more specifically, to build latrines. We slept on dirty mattresses on the floor, learned how to pee in the woods, and marinated ourselves in Deet concentrated bug spray. We were taught the proper way to use a saw, learned that it is easier to mix cement by slowly adding water, and that work gloves don't protect against hammer mishaps.

We also learned that lessons go both ways. Our group came expecting to teach the villagers about technology, modernity, and a better, more advanced way of life. But by letting them into our lives, we began to see a beauty in theirs; the simplicity of time, the strong connection to nature, and a devotion to family that many of us have never experienced.

The residents of San Antonio go about their normal lives despite the splendor that surrounds them. They are enveloped by mountains dipped in shades of green that roll lazily into one another, trees whose leaves resemble burnished gold in the distance but are merely brown upon closer inspection, and skies so clear you can see to the next village. Backyards contain trees and plants with coffee beans, papayas, plantains, and cantaloupes. Saturated with the scent of ripe fruit, a heavy, sultry wind moves slowly through adobe houses. Pigs and chickens run free throughout the village, squawking and oinking as they rush past. Donkeys stand tethered to trees, grazing on branches. Underfed cats and dogs roam, eating what scraps they can find.

As the week progressed, we found that despite the inspiring landscape, what was most special about San Antonio was its residents. Through our interactions with them, our group saw that a global community may not be as one sided as we assume it to be.

Claudia stands tall on her porch and moves with a fragile grace that can only be innate. The 16 year old's dark hair is pulled back from her face to reveal smooth tan skin. Narrow purple sunglasses adorn her face and as she talks she rocks back and forth. Claudia, like her older brother and younger sister, is blind from birth. Speaking in Spanish, Claudia tells me about her life through a translator. Articulate and determined, Claudia breaks down all the stereotypes of the handicapped. She studied in a special school for the blind in Tegucigalpa until she was in sixth grade. The school cost 15,000 limperas (\$794) per year and she eventually had to stop attending because it cost too much money. Claudia loved school and one day hopes to return and study criminal law or foreign languages. She has learned some English, and when I ask how old she is, before she hears the translated question, she proudly exclaims, "Sixteen!" Now Claudia stays at home—a run down two room adobe house—and helps her mother with housework. She has a few Braille books but has read through them and cannot afford more. But despite all this Claudia loves living in the village—the air, the people. She loves to sing and plays piano; I try to bridge the culture gap through song. After she names song after song I don't know, she finally offers up "Yesterday."

"Like the Beatles?" I ask.

"Yes," she says, and we sing a few bars of the Fab Four as chickens and dust swirl around us.

The children of San Antonio can stare at us for hours. They watch us as we work, as we talk, and as we eat. In their blue and white school uniforms, the children stare at us during their recess, coming close, then retreating, then coming close again. They giggle and tentatively step nearer when we speak to them. "Un photo permission?" one of the Americans asks slowly and incorrectly. They nod, approach like skittish fawns, and smile shyly. When we show them the resulting digital photograph, they laugh hysterically, amazed.

"Un miracle," one American says to them.

“No,” I burst out, “It’s not a miracle; it’s modern technology. They need to know that.”

In some ways, Honduran children are more advanced than American children will ever be. Parents have neither the time nor the resources to give them enrichment projects, gymnastics lessons, or extra math problem sets. Instead the children play with each other and when they are old enough they help their parents in the house or in the field.

Their parents let them fall down and make mistakes. It is not uncommon to see a three year old still wearing a diaper holding a machete as he plays outside. Machetes become Honduran men’s right arms—although we were repeatedly told that there is nothing more dangerous than a machete in the hands of a gringo. The parents’ behavior breeds self-reliance, and as the children become more comfortable around us, it is easy to see their unique sense of independence. We teach them American games like “red light, green light” and the “chicken dance”—a ubiquitous favorite of Bar Mitzvah parties. The children pick them up right away and we soon see them playing the games on their own. They teach us their games, which we try to imitate without success. Playing with the children, I often forget that I do not speak their language. We communicate so easily. When I tell this to our group leader, she reminds me that soon most of them will be out of school and helping their families earn money.

I think about this as we start having a “sing off”; first our group sings a song and then they sing one of theirs. We choose Disney songs like “I Just Can’t Wait to be King” and pop favorites like “My Girl.” When I listen to the words that these children are singing, with their backs tall and straight, it is hard for me to imagine me singing, let alone comprehending, these words at the age of eight.

“Mi mama me cuida, y ella cocina y limpia la casa.

Y mi papa trabaja en la granja asi yo puedo comer y asistir a la escuela.

El mundo es muy grande, pero parece mas pequeno con mi familia.”

“My mom takes care of me, and she cooks and cleans.
And my father works on the farm so that I can eat and go to school.
The world is big, but my family makes it feel small.”

On the second day of the trip I volunteer to help make lunch. The cook, Dona Hirlinda, and I work together in the small cramped kitchen. Dona Hirlinda, a gentle woman whose face is lined with kind wrinkles, has served as the chef for American Jewish World Service Tours in Honduras for six years. She wears simple skirts and tops that seem slightly familiar and probably come from the stores selling American clothing discards that have become popular all over Honduras. In the kitchen Dona Hirlinda and I work in silence. I communicate to her through pointing, gestures, and half-started never-finished sentences.

We smile shyly at each other as she shows me how to mash potatoes with a cheap plastic cup and then add full-fat butter and mayonnaise. I become absorbed in my work as I chop and boil plantains, but as they simmer on the stove and change from creamy white to deep yellow brown, I try to conquer the silence with hesitant questions. Finally, someone comes in who speaks Spanish and I begin to discover her story. Dona Hirlinda was married at fourteen and has six children and three grandchildren. She is from a village similar to San Antonio in the municipality of Trinidad (an area in Honduras, not the island). We begin to discuss politics, and I ask her what she thinks of the new President, Manuel Zelaya of the Liberal party (too soon to tell), and who she voted for (the other guy, a conservative). I tell her that I also voted for the other guy in the past US presidential election. She is surprised that even though my father voted for Bush, I was free to vote for Kerry.

Two of her children work in America and she calls them once a week. She says they like it in Arlington, Virginia but she is happy in Honduras. She says the situation is not as desperate as our group seems to believe.

“There are good people and bad people,” she says of her homeland.

“I’m from Washington, D.C.,” I tell her. “Same thing.”

Sarita, the grade school teacher, wears tight jeans and a cap-sleeve shirt. Gold hoop earrings jangle as she talks and her eyebrows are plucked into two painfully sharp arcs. In a village where most women are married by the age of 20, it seems unlikely that this single 29 year old would find her place. But she dismisses this possible stigma in her first sentence, saying that she doesn't feel pressure and will get married when the time is right.

"I'm not a mother yet," she says, "but I have 36 children in the school and I teach them to fear God and always have God in their lives."

Religion is very important in San Antonio. Everyone goes to church from six to eight p.m. The church is a modest white building with a cross on top, and someone has spray painted "YO JESUS" on its side in black block letters. The church has a simple interior; a bright purple tapestry on the wall, two crosses in the background, and a picture of the Pope John Paul II waving to a crowd. Honduras is mostly Catholic, but has a growing evangelical population.

Sarita acknowledges that the entire village was apprehensive when they heard a group of Jewish students were coming.

"It is because you are rude and because you killed Jesus," she says a bit hesitantly, "but now we see that you are good hardworking people."

As she says this, the girl next to me stifles a gasp with a loud cough. I am also shaken. In an attempt to quiet our obvious discomfort, Sarita rushes to say, "We have learned a lot from you, not only in our minds but in our hearts." But a tension still remains.

Sarita carries herself with poise and dignity, and it is clear that the other women defer to her. She is the only woman we meet to have graduated high school. She is immensely proud of this accomplishment and explains that this qualifies her to teach elementary school. I try to ignore nagging thoughts of friends earning masters degrees in secondary education and the theories of child development I was forced to learn during my summer as a camp counselor.

Although her immediate future is in San Antonio, Sarita has long term plans.

“Of course, I would like to go to the Holy Land, to Egypt, to the United States, anywhere. Everyone has hopes, dreams.”

Moon-drenched men congregate on porches every night to smoke and talk. If I encountered these Central American men at home on a late night, I would most likely look down at my feet and walk faster. But this isn't home. We are all natives somewhere and we are all foreigners somewhere else.

Machismo runs rampant in Honduras. This strong masculinity leaves women in the house to be mothers and wives. Indeed, for many of the men it was hard to see our largely female group doing manual labor. At first they wouldn't let us do any work, but slowly we earned their respect as we figured out how to lay foundation and build walls.

The men also appraised our \$70 hiking shoes and \$10 water bottles, knowing it would take them two weeks to earn the money to buy a plastic Nalgene. Some men leave the village to illegally immigrate to the US; 22 percent of illegal immigrants in the US come from Latin American countries. There however, machismo confronts a new reality as these men are forced to take menial jobs that include cooking and cleaning—traditionally a women's realm.

Machismo also leads to rampant adultery. Adultery is a leading factor in the spread of AIDS in Honduras. Our driver Dennis speaks English fluently, having spent five years in the United States and then working on a cruise ship. He plans to return to America to go to university. He has a round cherub face, wears a straw hat cocked to the side of his head, and is always smiling. He has the tendency to stand a little too close and touch you a little too often.

On the last day, a few of us ask what he thinks about machismo and the phenomenon of cheating.

“Everyone cheats,” he says laughingly.

“Even you?”

“Un poquito”, he says, explaining how his last two wives left him because

he cheated, and for this third marriage he has been good. He has cheated only twice.

An awkward silence permeates the car as we all look away and attempt to absorb this information. Oblivious to the sudden tension, Dennis continues to tell the corny jokes he studies from a website in order to perfect his English.

During our last night in San Antonio, all the villagers gather together to send us off. Standing in a circle, our group and the villagers take turns playing the guitar and singing underneath a sky in which every star is distinguishable. After a week, they know a few words of our songs and we know a few words of theirs. For a few brief moments there are no divides, as we say individual weepy goodbyes to those with whom we have grown close. But these moments are fleeting.

We are the first gringos they have ever seen and might be the last. Will they remember us or will we become vague stereotypes of America to them? Will we remember the impish grin Ramon gave when he climbed the flag pole, almost fell, and then caught himself? Or the way Eduardo deliberately cut us crunchy stalks of sugar cane with his machete? Or the roosters that woke us up at four every morning? It is unlikely that any of us will ever go back to San Antonio.

The whole village comes out as we drive past before sunrise. As we journey back to the airport, the terrain become less bumpy, more populated, and we are already thinking of papers we have to write, and the computers and cell phones awaiting us. Suddenly, we pass a dead cow on the side of road; a group of men are hacking at the carcass as children and women stand by with plastic containers. Its eyes have rolled back in its head and its body is splayed on the ground, as if submitting wholeheartedly to its fate. And soon we are in Tegucigalpa again with its pushy beggars and muggy streets, and at the airport we all rush to the gift shop to buy souvenirs.

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