

An open letter to the people of Honduras
Becca Kubick, Staff Reporter

Queridos Hondureños,

This past week, I had the great honor of visiting your country, becoming part of your world, taking in the sights and sounds and savoring each second. I worked with medical brigades, met the most amazing children, and made many lifelong friends. But, most importantly, I learned invaluable lessons about life, love, and the fantastic world around me.

First and foremost, you showed me the inspiring power of trust, faith, and total, unencumbered love. Each new day brought with it new brigades in new towns with new people, but still a pattern emerged: No matter where we went or who we saw, you came to us confident, joyous, and grateful, not knowing anything about us and yet trusting us completely. Most of you had never seen us before, and some didn't even know where we'd come from. We brought with us no proof of medical license, no official uniform or badge. We simply showed up with trunks of medications and set up desks in schoolyards and cigar factories, promising good advice and wonder drugs. That didn't matter. Our promise to help was enough for you. And that meant something to me.

Where I come from, people don't give their trust so freely. We see trust as vulnerability, and so each broken promise erects another wall around our hearts. Always forgiving but never really forgetting, I guess.

But trust means something different to you, I think. You'd sit down in front of us with your patient form and a smile, and I could just tell—it didn't matter whether or not we could cure all your symptoms so much as that we were trying. I met one man on my second brigade who exemplified this for me.

Etmundo was an 83-years-young firecracker of a man (in spirit, at least). He wore a soft leather hat (he asked me to feel it twice) and a sweater vest, walked with a cane and talked through an ever present smile. My friend and I were called over to evaluate him near the entrance of the brigade site, as he couldn't make it all the way to our desks. Within minutes, we learned of all his symptoms: the standard cough, cold, and parasitic stomach aches, but an additional blindness in one eye, deafness in one ear and near inability to walk. He laughed when I asked if he was taking any medicines at the moment, and his hat shifted to reveal a golf ball-sized tumor on his left cheek. It didn't hurt, he said. After the doctor arrived, we learned of a massive hernia that had been growing for four years. He still smiled.

In the end, I was ecstatic to hear that Etmundo would regain both his sight and his hearing, and that the cold, cough, and parasites would be long gone in less than a week. However, he didn't have the money to remove the tumor or the hernia, and we couldn't perform those operations safely in our makeshift camp. The problems were benign, but still painful, and they'd probably get worse.

I wasn't there when he got the news, but I saw him later as I headed for the bus. I asked if he could get them removed. He said no. I was visibly upset. He patted my shoulder and, with that same lovable smile, showed me his grocery bag full of medicines from the pharmacy. "Mira," he said. Look at all you've done for me.

I've thought about Etmundo every day since, and about so many of you just like him. Your gratitude was overwhelming—inspiring, really—and it taught me a lot about trivial complaining (something I'm admittedly known for). Too many breaths are wasted each day on everything that goes wrong, from bad grades to cold weather to James Charles. And why? There is so much to be grateful for in this big beautiful world; you can always find *something* to smile about.

(If nothing comes to mind, Etmundo—83-year-old Etmundo—has a 22-year-old girlfriend. Smile about that.)

Secondly, you showed me that love has no rules or restrictions. I arrived in Tegucigalpa thinking I'd spend a lot of time with my Hoban people and maybe play soccer with some niños; I didn't expect new friends. It's almost hilarious, in hindsight.

Almost right off the plane, I'd met Daniel. He was a bilingual Honduran native and fellow translator, older than my friends and I but not old enough to have ever used MySpace. We hit it off right away, and he taught us much about your way of life, as well as some fun local slang (yell fueraJOH every chance you get—it means out with the president, and people say it as casually as hello and goodbye).

We spent three hours together at the airport that day, waiting for the brigade doctors to land. We joked, we told stories, and we even Facetimed my family. Daniel and I talked each day after that, right up until my tears soaked through his shirt sleeve at the airport. Now, we text, and we will until I see him again.

Three days into the trip, I was introduced to Jimmy. I quickly learned he was a lot like myself—self-described as "not that fun," drinks a lot of coffee, gives frequent hugs, and loves to help in any way he can. I learned much more about him over the next few days, and smiled brighter each time I saw him again. A ladies' man, that guy. Everyone loved him.

I told him all about my adorable little brother back home. He told me about his life as an international trade student, and his dreams to come to America one day. We talked every day, and he got soaked with tears at the end as well. We text. And we'll see each other again.

I'd always known love was precious, but I thought that meant it required time, great effort, and meticulous cultivation. Then I saw your smiles. I learned of your hopes and dreams. I fell in love with the way you all love, and it took only days to know why: You don't confine love to a select few. It's for anyone who makes you smile, who listens as you gush about your family back home, who holds you as you cry in a bus seat or the crowded airport commons. It can be years in the making or a split-second choice. Love is love, no matter how or when or why, and I learned that from you.

Last but not least, I learned to find happiness in simple things. The mountains that broke through the clouds, the twinkling sunbeams that caught the palm leaves, the giant banana-shaped seeds that doubled as maracas when they fell to the ground. After a couple of days, positivity seemed effortless.

I got to spend time with the niños at our home camp after each brigade, and their love made such zeal even easier. I'd give a kid a sticker and get a friend for life. I played soccer with Roni and Hector, watched Jorge and Darwin do tricks on the swingset, and talked boy troubles with Marbella. These were easily some of the happiest moments of my life, and they cost me nothing.

You've learned to make the most of what you have in a way that's both inspiring and challenging. I now feel called to do the same. I want to find something that excites me as much as lollipops excited the little niños. I want to travel to new worlds that entrance me like yours did. But, most importantly, I want to love. Greater, and more often. Life is too short not to show love to everyone. Opening up to people will always help more than it hurts, and your people have shown me that this past week. I can't wait for the journeys that lie ahead, and I know many of them will lead me back to you.

Muchas bendiciones,
Rebecca