Belize 2015

Tallia McCormick

Over spring break I visited Belize, thanks to the financial help of the Isaac Harvey Fund. This was my fourth trip over the past four years going to Belize, and my first time (I think) using this Fund, as usually we have much more time before the trip to fundraise and plan, and I am so grateful that this Fund exists as a source for students interested in political change and social justice. It’s a very unique program that serves quite a significant role, I am so glad I got to experience using this Fund to help me create awareness for the things we are doing in Belize, and I cannot wait to tell other students with similar interests how easy this program is to utilize.

Every spring break (or around that time), my grandmother, Nancy McCormick, organizes a small mission team to take to Belize to work in the Friends Boys School. Many people are unaware of our school there, or have little idea about what it is exactly, so let me give you a brief preface. The school was begun by Sadie Vernon (Indiana Yearly Meeting) and a thought she had about “how to help.” Sadie proceeded with her thoughts, and with the help of FUM (Friends United Meeting), and Mike and Kay Cain (Indiana Yearly Meeting), the school was founded in the mid 1970s.

My grandmother’s first visit was in 1996, this was her 19th trip there. Over the past few years she started to feel it has been growing more and more necessary that we take groups there and really integrate ourselves into their culture, and get to know the students, and be able to SHOW them that people care about them. Belize is a very poverty stricken country, and since having separated from Britain that has only worsened. There is a lot of gang activity, and education there really suffers because of it. Education is never the first priority there, and often when a child tries, they are told not to because they are “too dumb” to do it. Frequently by teachers and peers, but often times even by their own parents and family. On top of this, they still employ many aspects of the British educational system, so for them to advance beyond the eighth grade they have to pass a test. If they are kicked out of school before the eighth grade or fail the test, that is the end of it, they have no second chance. So the school we have there is what is referred to as a second chance school; we accept students who have been kicked out, and who failed the test, and we can offer them up to two years at our school to behave properly and learn the proper materials in order to pass the test. Upon passing the test the child then has the option to go to high school or trade school and get a good job.

When we go on these trips usually we have between 8-14 people total, this year because of a transition with our host family and their role in the school no longer existing, we originally thought it would not be possible for us to go and stay with them, yet still work in the school. Once we found out this would be possible is was late December, generally when planning these trips we already have the dates picked out by September, we were very far behind this year. After deciding we should still go, we concluded it would be best if only the two of us went this time so we could see how things went and then decide from there how to go about the following years.

On each trip we have a base schedule that we try and follow. Each school days usually goes somewhat like this: we arrive and set out our plans for that day in the office, we gather all necessary materials and divide them into which craft they belong with, then we head downstairs and Ms. Candi assigns us to a child or group of children to help with whatever they’re doing (some need more help than others), then we go to lunch, upon our return we go over the Bible lesson for that day, set up the craft areas, and then we do the lesson plan, and then we go home for dinner and whatever we are doing that night. Before the trip we pick out one Bible story for each school day we will be there, along with a craft to tie to it and make it memorable to the children, as well as an interactive sketch for them to participate in. We also take small learning tools, like math tables or formulas, index cards with vocabulary words, etc., to give to the children that Ms. Candi (the teacher of 12 years) feels are struggling in those areas. Each person/pair/group is usually assigned one day, and each are in charge of that days plan. Although only one craft is related to the story of that day, we
usually do three separate crafts a day, switching them every 20 minutes. The last day (usually Friday), we go over all four stories, what their themes were, and how they are going to use this in their daily lives. Then we set out any crafts left (generally a lot) and they can do whichever ones they have not already done. Near the end of the trip, around the last full day, we have within the last few years been taking the children to Caye Caulker with us, so they can swim and learn about things on the island and visit the school there. It’s a really neat experience getting to see them do this, as 90% of them have never been out of the city, let alone visited any of the islands.

Each day is unique, and although it’s customarily awkward the first day or two, once the children begin to feel comfortable they start to really talk to you, and tell you about themselves. This is a key aspect of the trip, and we try to explain to those we take with us how important this moment is, if it should happen to them (it generally does). These children are children who are basically told they are unimportant their whole lives, no one ever asks them how they are doing. Which is really unfortunate when you stop to think about it, what if you went your whole life without ever being asked how you’re doing that day, or if you need anything, or even how school went. Many of the students Ms. Candi have had, and whom I have personally met and spoken with, have had very hard lives. Not only due to poverty and having to get a job when they’re nine years old, but also due to rape, abandonment, gangs and violence, really the list could go on forever. So while it is has been pointed out to me that we could simply send the money directly to them, instead of using it for flights and luggage and crafts and everything else, I stand by my decision to go every year instead. They are poor, very poor, yes. But they are also sad, and spiritually exhausted, and often feeling like they are not worthy of much at all. And I can say with zero doubt whatsoever, that I would rather spend money on luggage and crafts and get to see these children with my own two eyes, and get to help them with their schoolwork, and be able to ask them how their day is, or if they need anything, or if they want to talk, than to just give them money and hope everything ends up okay. It’s one thing to be told that people care about you; it is a completely different matter to get to see the people that care about you, and to get to hear them say it.

Every year is different. There are new kids, and there are old kids, kids about to pass the exam and move on, and kids you’re hoping will just get a grip. There are new things in the classroom, and things Ms. Candi notably, finally threw out. Tension in the city is higher than the previous year and the violence is worse, tension is lower than usual and maybe the violence is beginning to dispel. Most of the children in the classroom seem to be well taken care of and maybe even have guardians who care about them, or the majority are in pain, and you can see in their eyes and feel it when they speak. It is difficult, going there each year and not knowing what to anticipate in the classroom yet. There are children who go through the same things here, worse even in some places I am sure, but it’s regional, and it’s the minority of the population. In Belize, it’s everywhere, and it’s the majority of the population. In the City there isn’t one sight you can really focus on for too long before realizing that it would probably pale in comparison to the same sight in America.

The first year was the hardest for me, when I returned I was (as the host mom, Becky Barber, had said I would be) culture shocked. I couldn’t seem to fathom how little they had, and I was stunned at everything we have. There are few things I remember after a while, it feels like my head gets full and then memories just slip away after not recalling them for so long. But one thing I don’t think I’ll ever forget is crying at the mall, it sounds silly I am aware. After the first trip I took there I came home and adjusted to normal life, about a week later my friends and I went to do some shopping at the Fairfield Mall. I remember walking in and stopping amid the chaos, just looking around, at all of the stores and people and overflowing bags of things; unnecessary items. I felt dizzy and sick, and all I could think of was how wasteful, how we waste money every day on tangibles and how we waste time shopping when we could be using that time helping kids like the ones I’d just met. I had a very confusing rest of the week after that trip, and it wasn’t another two months before I went to a mall. But after time I adjusted, and started to understand more about life and myself and realize that just because things are like that now doesn’t mean they have to be, and that I have the power to help. Although every year is different, every year is also alike, because while it seems that everything has
changed and the kids have changed and I’ve probably changed a little too, the need for care is the same, and
the power we have to spread our love to someone else is the same, and maybe if not for a just a day, make
their life a little more bearable, and set their goals a little closer to their reach. I really appreciate the Isaac
Harvey Fund, and that it allowed me to experience this trip again.