

Putting Down the Foundation: Of a House, Of My Heart, and Of a Life

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As a sophomore at New York Institute of Technology (NYIT) this past semester, I had a life-altering experience during my spring break holiday. I, along with twenty other students from NYIT, took part in the alternate spring break program run by faculty that partners with the nonprofit organization Bridges to Community to build a home in the town of San Juan de la Maquana, Dominican Republic. In the community we visited, I had never seen such extreme poverty before. The daily reality of the people who lived there was a culture shock to me and forced me to come to grips with my own reality, the sheltered life I had experienced most of my life; I was inundated with emotions of fear and sadness that hit me all at once.

From that moment on, I knew I had to put forth my best effort. But I knew even my best effort would not be enough by any measure to make the sort of change I would ideally have liked to see. Visiting the Dominican Republic has changed many aspects of my life, specifically: my attitude, my mindset, and my passion.

As mentioned above, this life-changing experience occurred because of collaboration between our university and an organization called Bridges to Community. Bridges to Community is a non-denominational organization that addresses the needs of a community through direct communication with the residents. The organization hosts community meetings that allow residents to voice their concerns. Residents that attend these meetings can then request that a home be built or request other necessities. Bridges to Community had already built several homes and a youth center in San Juan de Maquana. The youth center provides tutoring for residents to help prepare them for a brighter future and break the cycle of poverty.

Without the youth center and its staff, attending college would never be an option for these kids due to the gaps in the educational system. Many of those at Bridges have little literacy skills, even in their native language. In addition to improving children's literacy skills, Bridges to Community also helps kids develop writing skills, learn other languages such as English, and tutors them on other subjects taught in school. This organization is a very crucial part of the town's development.

Another aspect of our experience with Bridges to Community was to understand the magnitude of the problems confronting people in the Dominican Republic, particularly the corruption at all levels of government. The facilitators of Bridges to Community shared with us that trees are cut down in the Dominican Republic and smuggled into Haiti. Haiti's scarcity of trees creates massive flooding of villages since the trees serve to hold down the water. Dominicans were losing trees without their knowledge so corrupt officials could profit.

The extent of corruption occurs at all levels. We were told that to get elected, the mayor of this community paved the roads and promised free rice and beans for every family, but only on the day of election. Having promised that families would not have to worry about food and other necessities, he subsequently never delivered on those promises. Complicating the matter is the corruption at the top as well. We learned the president of the Dominican Republic is also corrupt and acts like a dictator doing very little to help a country that is struggling.

Knowing about the extensive corruption helped me understand the problems on a structural level, but it was the experiences with the people I encountered on a daily basis that

created a newfound passion within me for helping others.

The people taught me more than I could ever imagine about myself and about the extreme poverty that some people experience. For example, residents lacked basic elements of an infrastructure. Many were without adequate housing and paved roads in addition to having no food to eat. Although the governor had appropriated money for these services, he did nothing while his own family lived lavishly exemplifying the pervasive, extensive corruption within the country.

Partnered with Bridges to Community, my classmates and I built a house in the community of San Juan de la Maquana, Dominican Republic working with the community for five days, six hours each day. First, we dug out the foundation and gathered impacted mud on the ground, using a pick ax. Next, we nailed barbed wire to wooden posts that was used as rebar to reinforce the concrete walls that we later poured and mixed.

We took great satisfaction in watching the house being built and community members were integral in communicating their needs during the building process. However, it was sad to see community members wearing the same clothes every day and many were without shoes, some as young as three years old. Despite the apparent hardship, satisfaction came from providing a home for a husband and wife and their thirteen children.

My experience in the Dominican Republic was enormously different than the life I live with my own siblings growing up as a middle-class child in a mostly upper-class community; I feel as if I lived my entire life in a bubble, completely unaware of poverty. As a result of this trip, I do not intend to live life regretting my newfound desire to work with underprivileged communities, realizing that most of my life I got almost everything I asked for at Christmas and my birthdays. I wish someone had told me that many others do not have the same privileges. I do not need the next iPod, but the community around me needs food on the table. This transformed my thinking about what is really, really important in life, but I had to experience another culture for that to happen.

This event made me aware of the privileged life and blessings I was given. It is a true privilege growing up as a middle-class child and not having to worry about the next meal. Sadly, kids in the community are mostly only able to eat flour and water, as part of a largely starch-based diet. This alone is a major setback they face from an early age. Seeing for the first time children with swollen stomachs and yellowing eyes, both major signs of protein deficiency, was heartbreaking. I held back the tears but felt sorrow and helplessness at not being able to do anything to help these kids. Most amazing, however, was when I saw their pure happiness while they played, realizing that regardless of how many hardships they were experiencing, they possessed an inner strength and joy nonetheless. The fact that they love their lives filled me with personal joy, but most importantly, it opened my eyes that there is a world that is often neglected and unheard of beyond the world I live in.

After serving in the Dominican Republic and having felt personally transformed through my experiences and struggles, my attitude has changed tremendously. First, I have a new appreciation for the magnitude of people facing poverty in my own neighborhood. Seeing a homeless people now, I understand that there might be something facing them that is beyond their control. They are human and should be treated as such.

Having been surrounded in the San Juan de Maquana community, I observed how community members interacted with each other and how tight their bond is for their families. The strength of the love they expressed towards each other they would never trade for any riches. I came to realize through my experiences with their culture that having so much and spending

wantonly does not lead to absolute happiness. Sometimes what really matters is not wealth in numbers, but wealth in spirit and love for each other.

Another lesson learned from my trip is to live each day at a time, not dwelling on tomorrow. The people do not look beyond the current day. They live in the present regardless of what tomorrow brings them, even though tomorrow might bring them no food. No matter what the day has brought, they keep on smiling, taking each present moment with grace and thankfulness. Their smiles warmed my heart and brought me joy, which gave me hope for a better future. It gave me hope that one day this community will prosper and provide for its citizens the help they desperately need.

The lessons I learned and the changes I made in my life could not have been made possible without community members. However, there is one person in particular who made the biggest difference of all. A four-year-old boy named Ongo was one of the many children I met during the trip. He taught me more than any adult could ever teach me about hard work and perseverance. Every day, no matter what kind of day he was having, he would show up with a smile, ready to work with us. As soon as we picked up our shovels, he picked up his and once he started, he did not stop. He had a house smaller than my room and in my time there, I only saw him eat flour and water, and nothing else, but he did not give up. Seeing this inspired me to never give up and keep a smile on no matter how hard my day. I can only hope that someday when Ongo grows up he will make a difference in the lives of his community, having risen above the extreme poverty he faces daily. The hope is that he will never stop smiling and make a better future for himself. Deep in my heart, I believe that he will.

Like Ongo, the children of this community have little money, but that seems completely normal to them. They are, however, rich in a unique way. They make the best out of life with the bare minimum, having learned to find happiness from the littlest things. They share compassion for others and although they might not have a new Gameboy or Barbie doll, they have something greater: pure happiness. Those kids have never had the happiness that I did from material possessions, but I came to realize how superficial that was, a lesson I needed in my life. I had become too wrapped up in “stuff,” and forgot about the pure joy of just being happy and the kids of San Juan Maquana helped me to see the pure joy of simply living. For example, the first time I saw Dominican kids jump off a tree into a watering hole experiencing pure joy, I was jealous. I felt like that was missing from my own childhood.

These kids showed me that when life’s twists and turns occur, how you handle them is what matters most. Even when it appears they have nothing, there is always something to smile about and something to share.

Having spent time with these kids provided me with life-changing lessons. Before this, I had blinders on, taking many things for granted. Now, I want to devote my life helping underprivileged individuals facing poverty. I would also like to start my own organization similar to Bridges to Community, using its model as my foundational base and its principles of community involvement providing housing, economic support, and helping these individuals pursue careers in their field of interest.

Witnessing such extreme poverty broke my heart, and I found myself not wanting to leave when our time was finished. I thought that if I could stay a year or two more, I could make a bigger difference. More homes could have been built and I could have forged stronger bonds with the families living there. Not being fluent in Spanish was the biggest hurdle to overcome, but by the time I return next year, I hope to rectify that dilemma so I can bond even more with residents.

Also, I will learn more about their culture so they can become more comfortable with us. During our trip, many of the residents were hesitant to speak to us and although our struggles as Americans might not appear as detrimental as their struggles, sharing them helps bridge the gap and shows that we are ultimately all human.

The cultural barriers themselves were transformative, helping me gain an awareness of the privileges of being an American citizen. We live in a democracy intolerant of pervasive corruption and we are free to pursue educational opportunities.

But what we can learn from the community of San Juan Maquana is invaluable too. We can learn to live in the moment rather than the fast-paced, work-focused world we are programmed to believe is normal. My experience with community members abroad also taught me to live with hope and joy, finding happiness in the everyday.

It was these big and little lessons that truly changed me and will continue to for my entire life. Before the trip, if someone were to ask me, "What is your purpose in life?" I would have been flustered by the question and not known how to answer it. Sometimes I would say, "To make money and be successful." Following the trip, I have put much thought into this question. Now I have a clearer understanding of what my purpose in life might be. Now if someone asks me the same question I would answer, "To help others because I have come to terms with the fact that without committing myself to others, my life would have less purpose."

This trip has given me more than I could ever imagine; building a house for a family with thirteen kids transformed me. It has taught me that living life to its fullest potential involves helping others anyway one can while embracing a smile, and when life knocks you down, get back up on your feet and walk another day with grace.

The people of San Juan de la Maquana find joy in the simplest things. When I was on the construction site, another lesson from the trip appeared to me. A girl was playing catch with a ball of dirt we got from the floor. This girl did not need the physical object, the ball. It was the activity that brought her joy. I realized the same joy I had playing basketball and baseball, this girl got from playing with a dirt ball, she was living in the moment.

In conclusion, I went to the Dominican Republic to help people, but in the end, I went there to be taught. I came home with more than I gave and a new perspective on life; I'm grateful for the experience. Bob Marley best captured it in the lyrics when he said, "Don't worry about a thing every little thing is going to be alright." In life's saddest moments, the only thing you can do is give your best smile, find your passion, and go with it.

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