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A Reflective Essay

My shoe slid into wet cement as I entered a humble house in La Divanna, one of the poorest neighborhoods of Tegucigalpa, Honduras. While I carefully maneuvered into a small living room, my eyes rested upon the reason for visiting. The woman blended into the pillows and blankets, her abdomen inflating and sinking rapidly like a mouse due to pulmonary damage caused by years working for an Old Navy maquila. Her spirit was beautiful and strong, but her body was failing her. I had never met this woman before, but I had a feeling that this encounter was one that I would never forget.

The three weeks I spent on the Hallelujah Honduras Lily Grant Program was an eye opening experience to the multiple ways every human is intricately connected to others in the world. After becoming conscious to the complicated ethics of garment assembly facilities and the way they affect the workers that make them function, I discovered my true social location in the world.

Assembly factories known as maquilas became extremely popular in Honduras during the late 1980's as a way for US owned companies to manufacture products using less-expensive labor. In 2002 Honduras was the number one exporter of clothing apparel in Central America. Sadly, the cheap labor for US companies frequently means long hours and low wages for the workers in other countries. Maquilas are also notorious for administering HIV tests on their employees, firing whoever tests positive. These practices have created a complicated issue of the maquila system in Central America; maquilas frequently provide poor-quality working conditions, yet they provide employment opportunities for people that may otherwise be unemployed. While in Honduras, we

encountered a group of people who are dealing with the delicate issue of the maquila system.

A few days after our encounter with the dying woman in La Divanna, we were introduced to an Episcopalian affiliated project with a new approach to the maquila. The project acknowledges how difficult it is to remain employed as a person with AIDS/HIV in Honduras and works in a holistic way to re-invent the maquila system. People with AIDS/HIV are employed by the program in a healthy working environment and receive affordable medical care at a clinic on the same city block. As the Episcopal Church leads the project, the workers also can receive their spiritual needs through the program. "Siempre Sol," the name of the project, is expanding its employment and reworking the maquila system.

After being exposed to the harsh poverty of Honduras and hearing stories from the people of corruption and injustice that is so prevalent in their country, the Siempre Sol project was a welcome positive vision. The vast amount of injustice done to the Honduran people was overwhelming many times throughout my three weeks there. When I would feel the Honduran peoples' problems seemed beyond solution, our group would visit an inspirational service organization that was doing their best at making a difference in their community. The amazing people of these organizations refueled me with hope when I had run out. Siempre Sol was one of my favorite organizations because it was tackling one of the most delicate issues facing Central America in a beautifully holistic way.

Five months after returning from Honduras, my perspectives on my time there are still changing everyday. What I experienced there was unlike anything I have ever sensed

in my life. Witnessing the glory of people doing amazing service work amongst so much hardship powered a rollercoaster of emotions in me. The one thing that has stayed with me most is the sense of connectedness I felt with the people of Honduras.

Sitting in that living room, hearing the wheezing breath of a dying woman, and knowing that the fabric debris that is slowly suffocating her came from clothing that will be displayed in retail stores across the US enlightened me to how far my consumer habits as a US American extend in the world. Simply looking around my dorm room I can connect myself to workers in Nepal, India, China, Pakistan, and Honduras. Until I traveled to Honduras, I viewed the *Made In* _____ portion of a tag on an article of clothing to be no more important than the care instructions that I, as a male college student, ignore so well. Now I see the people behind those tags; the stories, families, and dreams that they have, just like any person in the US.

This sense of a global connectedness is one that I could not have learned in any classroom, yet I feel a responsibility to reach out to others in the US to share my experience in any way possible. To tell the stories of the people of Honduras is to spread knowledge of the interconnectedness of our species on this planet and to work toward relationships fostered in solidarity between humans and nations alike. Thus, while many of my perceptions on my time in Honduras are still maturing, I am deeply grateful to have had an experience that opened my eyes to how we are all truly one people under one sky on planet Earth.