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Casa de los Angeles, Mexico
Final IE3 Report

After a week of being able to explore San Miguel de Allende, I started at Casa de los Angeles. Four of us were starting at the same time. The Volunteer Coordinator gave us a tour and introduced us to everyone while explaining the daily routine. I started in Maestra Vero's classroom. I felt shy and like I didn't know a word in Spanish. Vero was welcoming, understanding, and helpful. As the day progressed, I felt even happier with Vero and the two-year-olds in her classroom. Even at the end of the day when I had the privilege of cleaning up poop from one of the kid's pants, I still felt like I belonged there.

As I mentioned above, that first day it felt like I didn't know any Spanish. I knew how to ask basic questions to the teachers and kids, but sometimes I had a hard time understanding the response. Luckily, this changed quickly. I started taking Spanish classes with the Volunteer Coordinator and making an active effort to practice as much as possible. Toward the middle of the internship, I could easily tell the children what to do and communicate with them in other ways. By the end, I could understand most of what I heard and communicate more conversationally with others.

As far as challenges go, when I arrived for my first week, the daycare was closed due to Semana Santa. I spent my first day alone and it was definitely overwhelming. The cobblestone streets, uneven and steep sidewalks and many streets not marked with signs. The first two of these were easy to get used to and eventually it all felt like home. It took a little longer to figure out how to get around. I got very lost my first day and the following days. However, I was able to look at it as an adventure and each time I found something new and interesting. After I became comfortable with San Miguel, I relied on getting lost in order to find new places.

At the beginning, I was nervous, shy, and homesick. I was scared I was going to screw up this amazing opportunity. I was worried about transportation and grocery shopping. I was scared of getting lost or seeming so vulnerable that someone would take advantage of me. Now that I have returned to Oregon, I realized that these things do not scare me anymore. As I prepared for another trip abroad (that I will be doing this summer), I found myself still anxious, but I'm able to embrace it and I'm excited for the things that "don't go as planned". I feel that this has been a huge personal accomplishment for me.

Professionally, I have improved my Spanish abilities, been able to work in a completely different environment and thrive, and I was able to pick up on the routine quickly and assist the teachers repeatedly without being asked. This experience has given me more confidence with my professional abilities and I have started applying to programs and jobs that I probably wouldn't have thought myself worthy of before.

These personal and professional changes occurred as I worked to be an asset to the organization. I started by being an observer to get to know the culture and the routine a little more before jumping in head first. After I felt more comfortable, I started interacting with the kids more and realizing what needed to be done and accomplishing it many times without the teacher present. One of the biggest steps I took was taking the Spanish lessons with the Volunteer Coordinator. This helped me be more effective in the classroom by being able to communicate better with the teachers and the children.

The Volunteer Coordinator not only helped me with the Spanish language, but she was also constantly checking in to make sure I was doing alright. She made herself available if I needed to talk to her for any reason. She helped the volunteer house feel like a family and that made it so I felt at home very quickly.

Jamie, my IE3 advisor, sent me updates of problems happening in my area and constantly checked in to make sure I was doing alright. My other advisors back on campus did not contact me at all; however, I know I would have received their support if I needed it.

The support from IE3 and the information I got from the Volunteer Coordinator ahead of time really helped me not feel shocked when I arrived. I was full of awe and admiration, but also noticed the signs of poverty. I immediately loved the people I met and the food I ate. However, as the internship continued this awe fell behind a strong sense of love and passion for San Miguel de Allende. I could see the beauty in what wasn't apparently beautiful (broken down buildings, for example). I knew my way around town, and I made friends to go get tacos with or play some football. There was always something to do and people to be with, but at the same time I felt comfortable sitting and eating ice cream on the patio by myself or with others. The initial awe I felt still existed, but I definitely was overwhelmed with a strong passion for the country, culture, and people.

Of course, there are some things I wish I had known before I arrived. I wish I brought a raincoat and a pair of boots because when it rained, the streets were completely flooded. I do wish my Spanish was better at the time of arrival, because I would have liked to talk to the people in the community more. Lastly, I really wish I knew that taco stands were safe to eat at and pretty much the best food ever. I am sure there are more things I could write for this, but honestly, everything just had a way of working itself out if it happened and I learned and grew from it. I am very satisfied with how my experience at Casa de los Angeles went.

On a typical day, I wake up around 7:30am to get ready. Around 8:30am, the group of volunteers and the Coordinator leave the volunteer house for the daycare. We arrive around 8:50am and enter the classrooms around 9:20am after a couple cups of coffee (however toward

the end, I spent more time in the classrooms in the morning). This morning time is great to get information from the Volunteer Coordinator or talk to Donna and Miguel.

During the morning, I help the teachers with breakfast duties (feeding with the youngest kids, but mostly getting the kids more food from the kitchen), brush the kids' teeth, and then we have some sort of activity that is education for the kids. Before naptime, the older kids get taken to the bathroom and the babies are changed into clean diapers. We have a long break during naptime that I've sometimes used to take a nap myself, practiced Spanish, explored the area, or read a book. Afterward, the kids get ready for lunch and eat. Around 2:15pm or whenever the kids are done eating, we change them into clean clothes before going home. I usually leave the daycare around 3:15pm and spend the time playing with the kids until their parents pick them up.

Some days have a slightly different schedule. On Mondays, the kids to a flag ceremony around 9:15 before breakfast. It can be very helpful to assist the teachers during this to keep the kids from acting out (usually it's not a problem, but sometimes they're rambunctious). On Tuesdays and Fridays right after breakfast, the oldest kids go to the park. As a volunteer, you help the kids walk to/from the park by holding their hands, and you play with the kids as much as possible to wear them out. Usually, they do a pretty good job on their own, but games like Monster are perfect. Lastly, most Wednesday mornings the kids have dancing. The two year old classrooms stay downstairs and the three year old classrooms go to the roof. This is done before breakfast and it's important for volunteers to be involved to help the kids out and get them motivated. It is also a great way to start the morning, in my opinion.

My best advice to other interns is to connect with the teachers, children, staff, and other volunteers with their whole heart and nothing less. This can be done even with a simple genuine smile. Once I did this, everything at the daycare came natural: the routine, play, discipline, and

general interaction with the Casa de los Angeles community. I would also tell another intern to use the help of the Volunteer Coordinator. Talk to him/her for advice, vocabulary, help, and just general support. Another tip: just have fun! Being preoccupied with sanitary or curriculum differences at Casa de los Angeles verses what you may be used to in the United States is not something to be concerned with or bothered about. Embrace the cultural differences in the work environment, but still feel free to offer suggestions and ideas. Lastly, you will probably get diarrhea and maybe a cold, or get lost, or feel a little homesick, but what doesn't kill you is just another learning experience.