

Jacqui O'Mara – Mexico 2011

Being a part of the Mexico project in June this year was an unforgettable experience, one that has changed the person that I am and will forever shape everything I want and do in the future. Living in a different culture, being a part of a new community, and of course, spending time with the beautiful children of the Casa Hogar Orphanage for six weeks provided me with experiences and memories that I would never experience at home. On top of this, the friendships that I developed with my fellow volunteers and group leader I will treasure forever.



Casa Hogar – photo by Kat O'Connor

Day-to-day life in Mexico followed a familiar pattern- either spending the day cooking and cleaning as hombody, performing maintenance work, or at the Girls' House playing with the children. Despite this repetitive routine, no day was ever dull, each providing a new set of challenges, unfamiliar situations, and ultimately a feeling of satisfaction. Work tasks included painting a stairwell and creating a mural; repainting and varnishing the front door of the Boys' House, the gate and fence at the Girls' House, and many signs at both houses; painting cal on trees at both houses; and creating a vegetable garden and compost heap at the Boys' House. Many of these tasks were unfamiliar and well outside my comfort zone- I'd never mixed paint, used varnish, and hadn't spent any time in the garden since I was a little kid- and I certainly would never have expected to enjoy performing any of these activities as much as I did. No matter how small or mundane a task was, everything we did was working towards our overall goal of creating a better environment for everyone that lived at the orphanage. We faced some setbacks and had problems obtaining materials, meaning we didn't complete all of the tasks that we had been asked to perform. This for us was both frustrating and disappointing. We quickly learnt the concept of "Mexican time" and realised that the most valuable trait for us to have was patience. In spite of our initial eagerness and enthusiasm, the fact that some materials hadn't yet arrived, and the fact that many of the materials we had were not adequate for the jobs that we needed to perform meant things did not initially pan out as we had hoped. For our group, it was a big cultural difference- we had come from a culture where everyone is in a hurry and no one has time to waste- so having to wait for things to happen was frustrating, but did teach us a valuable lesson.

Our two days a week spent at the Girls' House with the children were always special. Being able to spend time with them and see the smiles on their faces each time provided us with so much satisfaction. I was inspired and in awe of the children- hearing the stories of what some of them had been through prior to coming to the orphanage was heartbreaking, and their resilience and courage never failed to affect me. Having their trust extended to us was such an honour, and developing relationships with these children was an experience unlike any other. I hope that in my six weeks at the orphanage I was able to leave an impact on the children. I know that the impact each made upon me will be everlasting, and the joy that they provided me over the six weeks is something that I cannot describe.



Jacqui with one of the Casa Hogar kids- photo by Lucy Warhurst

This routine was broken up by free time over the weekend- spent spending time in Texcoco the local town, venturing into Mexico City, hanging out with the Red Cross ambulance volunteers, sightseeing with locals in the community, and the big highlight, climbing the Teotihuacan pyramids. Each experience provided us a taste of Mexican culture and Mexican life. Everything in Mexico is big, bustling, busy, colourful, and often very very crazy! But ultimately what made the biggest impression on us was the hospitality that we were provided by locals. We were driven places in the back of an ambulance, assisted with our grocery shopping, given rides in the back of a ute, taken out for lunch and dinner, and welcomed into so many homes. We were all so amazed that these people from a country with far lower wealth than our own were so generous. Mexican people are very proud of their country, their family and their homes, and for them, being able to give us a taste of all of this provided them with so much happiness. Experiencing this culture has made me re-evaluate the life that I have here in Australia, and the future that I want to create for myself. Ultimately I have realised that many of the things that I have spent energy worrying over are nowhere near as important or significant as I'd thought. So many of the aims and dreams that many of my friends have here to me no longer bear significance- I feel as though there is so much more to life now and can't imagine myself wanting those same material possessions.

Ultimately for me, the part of the program that I think developed me most was living with the other volunteers and our group leader- managing and negotiating tasks between us, managing the different personalities, and managing the cultural barrier between us and our group leader from Costa Rica were all aspects that initially were challenging. Spending so much time with these four people meant that we all had to get along, and I know that by the

end of the program I had definitely improved my ability to work with other people in a team. I also believe that living in this environment has made me more independent- going from living at home in a comfortable environment to suddenly having to do everything for myself was a big learning curve. Additionally, the responsibilities that I had to take on during the program helped me develop my leadership skills. I have never been a natural leader, so having my own responsibilities and roles that I had to achieve for our group to function definitely assisted me in understanding that I do have these abilities. As well as gaining a new sense of confidence through developing as a person, I gained some amazing friends that I will treasure for life. I will always have fond memories of the times that we shared together- there was never a dull moment in the house. Each night was filled with talking, listening to music, more talking, dancing, taking crazy photos, more talking, breaking things, and always lots of laughter. I know that I will never be able to recreate that environment nor the bond that the five of us shared.



YCA volunteers Sean and Jacqui with Esteban (Field Staff) – photo by Lucy Warhurst

The only bad part about the experience was having to say goodbye- goodbye to the community, the children, and the other volunteers and our group leader. Farewelling Mexico and all the joy it brought was more difficult than I had ever imagined it would be. However, I left as a more complete person, more ready than ever to tackle every challenge that may come my way, and inspired by the resilience and happiness that I saw in each child at the orphanage. Each day there is something that reminds me of a part of the project, reminding me how fortunate I have been to have been afforded the opportunities that I have had, and reminding me that I need to make the most of everything that I have.