

- Primeros Pasos



Surrounded by sleeping babies, crying toddlers, and their loving mothers, this past summer, I worked with Primeros Pasos, which is located in Quetzaltenango, Guatemala. The organization's mission is to help children take their first steps by fighting malnutrition and poverty in the rural Palajunoj Valley through the comprehensive efforts of clinical and community outreach work. The main focus of my project was creating a course for mothers participating in the Nutritional Recuperation Program focused on self-esteem through conversations surrounding mental health and building skills for confidence with babies through baby stimulation. The course also focused on breaking detrimental cyclical

patterns, such as abusive relationships and toxic masculinity. After determining the topics of the course in conjunction with the community outreach director, I researched, wrote, and co-taught the material to five rural communities within the Valley. After one of the classes in the remote community of Las Majadas, one of the abuelas supporting the mothers in the class approached the community outreach director, Diana. In further discussion she explained that her son was mysteriously taken a week earlier, with his body found a few days later, the family not knowing why. Diana then reminded her of the stress and anxiety managing techniques that I taught from my course material. While this felt woefully inadequate in such a tragic situation brought about by massive systemic issues, Diana would not have had concrete advice to give her without my course. Being able to educate the staff on therapies, such as breathing techniques to cope with panic attacks and the importance of talking to others to process through emotions, gave purpose to my work and validated its importance within the context of these communities.

After discussing with the doctor in the clinic, the need for another project was revealed in which, collaborating with another volunteer, I researched and developed material explaining the differences between chronic and infectious diseases, hypertension, diabetes, and mental health related to long term management of chronic diseases. The material will be distributed in the clinic to explain these most commonly misunderstood topics.

Additionally, after many administration changes and the COVID-19 shutdown, I facilitated the restarting of the grant writing process for the organization by diving through disorganized past materials, updating grant information, and researching new grants. This information was then passed onto the next volunteers to enable the continuation of Primeros Pasos and their mission through funding.

Through my project, I developed immense empathy for the women with whom I had the privilege of interacting. Seeing our many similarities, but also the many hardships they endure daily, I saw the immense strength of these women, their desire to fight for their basic rights, and their hope for change. The strength of these communities, and particularly the women, is astonishing. They are bold in their resilience and determination but are unaware of this internal boldness because they simply get up every day and continue on. Their joy is contagious; however, it is a unique type of joy, one shaped through choosing community and strength in hardship.

