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Internship Experience: Summer 2013

When I first found out that Soka University of America offered a substantial grant to reimburse student expenses for summer NGO work, I immediately thought about the possibility of interning at ChildFund Brasil. At the beginning of January 2013, I traveled to the Valley of Jequitinhonha, located in the northeastern region of Minas Gerais, Brazil, with a professor and a group of 11 other students to work with the NGO ChildFund Brasil. Moreover, the trip was in collaboration with a partnered organization called ASCOMED within the nearby city of Medina. I learned a great deal about their project 'Olhares em Foco' which implements the PhotoVoice methodology to empower youth in marginalized communities. By the end of the trip I felt that I had a solid understanding of the project; however, my knowledge of the entire NGO was rudimentary. I had many lingering questions about these partnerships with community-based organizations like ASCOMED, the sponsorship system, and the actual social change that came about from their efforts. These same questions resurfaced when I was informed about this amazing grant opportunity, and I quickly began working on an application with the hope of learning and helping more.

I spent several months planning my work agenda, filling out the grant application, and convincing my parents that I had to go. I was in close contact with the program manager of ChildFund Brasil, Dov Rosenmann, whom I had met and worked with during the 2013 learning cluster. In May, I learned of the good news that my application was one of 15 chosen. Prior to leaving, there were many things that greatly concerned me such as the language barrier, my usefulness in the NGO, and simply living in a foreign country for two months. It was only until

after I bid my parents farewell at the airport and then stepped onto my international flight that I felt these worries temporarily disappear. Although I had a basic idea of what I was going to be doing at the headquarters of ChildFund Brasil, I could not have imagined how full and diverse my two month stay in Brazil would be.

I lived in an apartment flat, located in the downtown center of Belo Horizonte, with a fellow intern from ChildFund Brasil. At the organization's headquarters, I was placed in the social programs department so that I could see how the organization's many projects are organized and implemented. In this department I recognized a familiar face from the January trip, Maria Fernanda, and I got to assist her in organizing an upcoming trip. My duties were very limited and mostly involved doing small errands for Maria Fernanda such as putting together informational folders for the participants of the trip and revising emails written in English. More importantly, I observed the whole process and realized that the planning required for this kind of trip takes a great deal of communication, time, and effort.

After all of the preparations for the trip had been made, my supervisor, Dov, wanted me to go along with the ChildFund Brasil team on the trip. The role of our team was to provide support to a Christian benefit group from the United States called 'Girls of Grace' so that they could shoot a promotional video in Brazil. Coincidentally, the trip was to the Valley of Jequitinhonha. This unique travel experience to witness the production of a Christian sponsorship commercial raised many questions for me. The Girls of Grace team had a specific commercial formula and model that they tried to adapt to the harsh poverty situation in this area of Brazil. Although I disagreed with their over-simplistic approach to poverty, I learned a great deal about the unavoidable reality of charity donations to instigate social change.

When we returned to Belo Horizonte, national and international coverage showed Brazil to be in a state of chaos, whereby nation-wide protests sought to incite a revolution. The protests were primarily composed of college students who blamed the government for a host of the nation's problems such as poor education, inadequate public transit, faulty infrastructure, etc. The atmosphere of the streets of Belo Horizonte was ablaze with protesters screaming different rally cries and holding up posters with political statements. It was during this unstable time that I decided to participate in several protests with my roommate because I was curious about the whole situation. At the beginning, the protests were passive; however, this was no longer the case when public vandalism, rioting, and police brutality erupted. The riots towards the end of the FIFA Confederation's Cup were especially violent because the police had to stop the protesters from storming the soccer stadiums, which had many foreign visitors.

The last protest that I participated in exemplifies their violent reality. Nearby the soccer stadium Mineirão in Belo Horizonte, approximately 80,000 protesters gathered in the streets screaming, setting off fireworks, and advancing towards the police. I witnessed the police fire numerous tear bombs into the crowd, and I also felt the horrible stinging sensation of the bombs. I can still recall the distinct images of smoke billowing out of burning cars, the humming noise of the police helicopters overhead, and the countless smoke trails that ripped apart the sky because of the polices' tear gas canisters. I left the procession shortly after the first volley of tear gas; however, the other 80,000 protesters that day did not leave. Although I had not expected there to be riots in Brazil during my internship, I feel that this experience was valuable and something I will never forget.

The protests did not greatly disrupt the daily work at ChildFund Brasil, and I began studying for the Project Management Development Professional Level 1 test. Dov wanted me to

take this test because it would give me a better understanding of the generic project life cycle that many of ChildFund Brasil's projects are required to undergo. The high level of detail concerning each stage of the project life cycle and also the responsibilities of the project manager was difficult material and required me to study a lot before taking the final test. After I passed the 75 multiple choice online test, I began attending more meetings and conversing more with the staff. It was not long before I came to realize how complex these social programs are and all the procedures that go into managing them. There are so many partnerships that ChildFund Brasil is involved in, not to mention that it is only one branch of ChildFund International, which is headquartered in Richmond, Virginia with operations in 31 other countries. The communication between the national/international offices and the national/regional offices is confusing and definitely requires more than a two month period of time to fully understand. In addition, I experienced a lot of bureaucracy concerning my internet use, field trip safety waivers, and liability paperwork. It became clear to me that NGOs function as businesses because they constantly need to maintain crucial relations, finances, and image. Childfund Brasil relies on many different networks to survive and prosper, and business expertise is required of many of its employees despite its non-profit status.

During the second month, I changed departments and began working in the sponsor relations department. I was excited to help out with translations because, by now, my Portuguese had greatly improved. My work consisted of translating emails, messages, and letters from Portuguese to English, revising English documents from other departments like the programs and marketing departments, and clarifying English texts for the other translators. During this time I really felt that I was contributing to the organization because they receive numerous emails every day from English speaking sponsors around the world who want to know more about their

sponsored children concerning their health, status in school, family conditions, etc. I worked closely with three Brazilian translators in the sponsor relations department, and the work environment was easygoing and friendly. The nice thing about working in this department was that everyone could speak English fairly well so I could choose when I wanted to practice my Portuguese or not. All in all, my experience in the sponsor relations department contrasted very well with my experience in the programs department, and I greatly improved my Portuguese through my work in translations.

In addition, I had many conversations with the other translators about their job and their opinions about the sponsor- child system. Ever since I learned about this online relationship between the sponsor and the sponsored child, I felt that this connection was unnatural and could easily be taken advantage of. When sponsorship ends after a child reaches 24 years old, many families sink into further poverty because they become heavily dependent on the additional funds. I tried to conceive of a better alternative; however, I did not have much success. After speaking with some of the translators, they agreed that while this system is not perfect, it does lead to positive changes within the lives of the sponsored children and their families. One translator noted that whenever she visits a community that has sponsored children and sees the benefits they have accrued from sponsorship, it makes her job worthwhile. After my experience in this department I have come to appreciate this system more. There are many genuine people around the world that want to do something about the issue of poverty, and despite their long distance relationships, this system allows people to make a positive change in the lives of poor children without necessarily being there in person.

My second month in Brazil was even more hectic than the first because I fit in two separate trips to São Paulo, a day trip to Ouro Preto, a weekend visit to the city of Governador

Valadares, and a short visit to Iguazú Falls. I was able to justify these trips because I worked at ChildFund Brasil on the weekdays from 9am to 4pm, which exceeds the 20 hour per week grant requirement. Also, when I traveled with ChildFund Brasil to Jequitinhonha and Serra I received extra hours off because the trips happened to be on the weekends. As a result of my solo travel trips, I got to see more of Brazil. Dov was more than happy to allow me to travel around and get a more full experience than simply working every day in the NGO. I met a lot of new faces and old friends during my travels and it also gave me a better idea about how huge Brazil is.

Looking back on these past two months, my perception of NGOs has drastically changed. At the beginning of my trip, I had the pre-conceived notion that working in an NGO was similar to activism. It was this idea that working in an NGO would be exciting and that I would be on the forefront of social change. Although NGOs like ChildFund Brasil do succeed in their main objective of social change, my experience there was not what I had envisioned it to be. I found that working in the headquarters was more a picture of hard work and stress than glamour and adventure.

Many organizations operate in similar fashion to ChildFund Brasil; however, there are slight differences in approach that distinguish good/effective NGOs from bad/poorly managed NGOs. My supervisor adamantly told me to not let this experience at ChildFund Brasil determine my perception of all NGOs. His advice to me was to continue experimenting with other NGOs because each one is run differently. Although the reality of NGOs is that they have become more like businesses with humanitarian elements, there is still a great deal of positive change that comes about through their efforts to reform society.

My internship at ChildFund Brasil exposed me to the complex multi-layered partner relationships within this NGO, the organizational models used to coordinate their many social

projects, the dynamics involved with the sponsor-child relations department, and the basics of project management development. I could not have asked for a better internship experience because I felt that it was balanced with NGO work, travel excursions, and political activism. During my stay in Brazil, I greatly improved my Portuguese and made many contacts that might help me pursue more work in the non-profit world. I happened to arrive in Brazil during an important time in the country's history because the protests were larger than any since 1985, when Brazilians demanded an end to military dictatorship. Although my stay in Brazil was only for two months, it was jam-packed with different experiences that have given me more perspective about the possibility of working in an NGO; and, as a result, I have grown so much from this amazing internship experience.

