

PBRC Student Travel Awards Internship Report

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During my study abroad in Mexico, I participated in volunteer activities at a local NGO called Matraca (The Movement of Support for Children who Work and/or Live in the Street) in Xalapa, Veracruz, which works to support the street children and their families. I received funding from the Pacific Basin Research Center to do an internship at this NGO to better understand and learn about the street children and poverty in Mexico and to gain firsthand experiences. From June 3rd to July 15th, I participated in various activities at Matraca with the objective of learning about how an NGO function to support street children and their families.

My activities during the internship included:

- Family visits in peripheries of Xalapa
- Helping the elementary school in the NGO
- Accompanying the families to purchase their needs (medicine, clothes, etc.)
- Counseling with the families
- Preparation for a workshop (investigation on prices of materials)
- Cleaning and organizing the school and office rooms
- Making documents

The principal reason why I wanted to stay and continue this internship at Matraca was to keep visiting the families of street children. However, I was not able to do this activity as much as I wanted because the NGO had to work on other things during the summer. But instead, I had opportunities to participate in other activities of the NGO and interact with the families in different ways. Also, I was able to interact with the children at the elementary school, which I had not experienced before this internship. I had so much difficulty interacting with the children because they were really difficult to handle (they would not listen to me, swore, and fought with each other). But the great thing was that I was able to see the backgrounds of those children through family visits. Seeing where those children come from not only helped me understand their behavior better but also made me wonder the effects of living in the poverty on children (which can be a topic for my future research).

During the internship, I questioned myself over and over what poverty really means. I could not help thinking that it is what the developed countries are imposing on developing countries because it did not seem to me that the families I interacted with thought they lived in “poverty” although they had difficulties in making their ends meet. At first, I was really surprised to see the living conditions of the families because they were so different from what I was used to. However, as I got to know them better, I realized that these families accepted their lives as they

were and lived with strength, wisdom and laughter. This experience made me rethink the definition of “poverty.”

The greatest thing I learned from the NGO is the attitude of “accompanying” the population instead of “helping.” The staff emphasized the importance of “accompanying” the children and families again and again. Many times what I witnessed between the staff and the families was a friend-like relationship. I thought that this was great because it dissolves the power relationship between “the helpers” and “the helped.”

If I had not had this grant, my experience at this NGO would have probably been superficial. Because this grant enabled me to continue my internship, I was able to participate in various activities and learn about how a local NGO functions to support the vulnerable population in the city of Xalapa. I was also able to deepen my thoughts on themes such as poverty, education, and the roles of NGO, and I intend to continue seeking my own answers about them. With this experience in my mind, I would like to dedicate myself to my future studies so that I can be a capable person dedicated to making a contribution to society.