

Not Everything That Counts Can Be Counted

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Reflection from the Washington University Catholic Student Center's
2004 IST to Guatemala

How can I measure the difference I make? To quote Albert Einstein, "Not everything that can be counted counts; not everything that counts can be counted." When I went to Guatemala for two weeks with seven companions, I wanted to leave those people with something tangible. I wanted to build them a house or give them something that I could point to and touch, something that I could quantify and look back and say, "I did that for them". But that wasn't the case.

When we were down there, we fixed up the school, we helped repair a road, we taught the kids some math, but more than anything, we just spent time with people. We gave them our time and our love. We invested our time in the people and showed that they were worth it. When we came back, I would explain to people what we did and they would often say, "So...you just hung out with them?" I understood where they were coming from. If you had told me before we had left that that is all we would be doing, I probably would not have gone. But the trip completely reshaped my understanding of service. How much does it mean to a person when they see that we put in all of this time and money and preparation to go down there and share in their lives, and listen to their stories and make them feel welcomed and loved because they are worth my time and love? Our living there for two weeks meant the *world* to them.

The day before we left, a woman invited us over to have lunch with her family. After we ate and conversed and were leaving their home, she said to us, "You are angels; you make the people feel important and you listen to them. White angels with halos." What those people need more than anything is money, education, a way out of their cycle of poverty. But what they wanted from us more than anything was just our time and our love. It was *incredible* how much the people appreciated us just giving two weeks of our lives to be with them – playing with the kids, talking with the families, listening to their stories, sharing in their lives, giving them our time and our love. More than anything, they just wanted their voices to be heard and to know that people care about them. I've never gotten so many smiles and hugs and kisses in my LIFE! From people of all ages!

One of our closest friends was a little eleven year old girl, Andrea. Our first day in the colony, Andrea was always trying to spend a lot of time with me, even though I couldn't understand hardly anything she said. She *knew* I couldn't understand much. She could've easily just stayed with other people in our group who were fluent in Spanish but she always wanted to be around me, holding my hand, talking to me, getting me really involved in the games they played. I had so many mixed emotions. Part of me was annoyed. I could hardly understand her. So why couldn't she just leave me alone? Another part of me felt really bad for her because here I was, this outsider coming to live with them for two weeks and I hardly knew their language. I felt so bad that she was trying so hard to make me feel welcome and help me have fun, but I could hardly even have a conversation with her. But a part of me was so moved by Andrea. She knew I couldn't understand much, but she *still* went out of her way to be with me, to spend her time with me anyway. I must have looked so out of place there. Picture this six foot four inch white giant in a land of Guatemalans. My nickname there was "El Gigante" – "The giant". But Andrea was going to make sure I felt loved. She was going to make sure I knew how grateful she was that we were there. The first day we arrived in the village, *before Andrea even got to know us*, one of the first things she said to us was "No se vaya." Don't go. She said, don't go.

You experience it and you cannot help but let it change you. We went to Guatemala offering hardly anything of tangible significance, but that was greatest gift we could give. During my high school years, I

wanted to go into business, make a lot of money, give a bunch of it to the poor thinking that would be enough. But now, that detached charity from a distance is not enough. We are called to work *with* the poor, not just *for* the poor. After all, not everything that can be counted counts; not everything that counts can be counted.