



Todos Santos de Cuchumatán, Huehuetenango, Guatemala

Alternative Spring Break || Building Bottle Schools

Sunday, March 13 – Sunday, March 20th

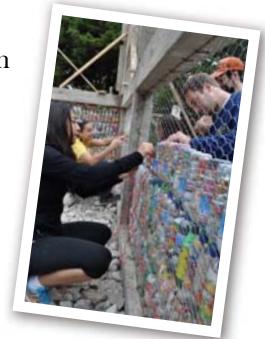
Eight hours north of Guatemala's capital city, we finally reached a plateau in Cuchumatán. We were hit with a barren landscape; It was a far cry from the lush, green tropical scenes promoted in the Guatemalan ecotourism pamphlet. We began the descent into the clouds in our van. The bumpy dirt road made us bounce around inside as our van hugged the turns on the winding cliff road. Finally, we came to a stop in a valley nestled by towering mountains. We had arrived in Todos Santos.

The purpose of our trip was simple: we wanted to use our spring breaks to assist with a community development project. With such a large Peace Corps population at SIPA, it wasn't hard to find a development project abroad in need of volunteers. In collaboration with Hug It Forward, a San Diego based non-profit, and a local Peace Corps volunteer working in Todos Santos, we joined the effort to build the first high school in Todos Santos. We were attracted to the project for its innovative use of discarded plastic bottles to build schools, but also for its focus on community empowerment.





Before this project, the only high school in the area was a two and a half hour drive, in the city of Huehuetenango. The distance from the town and the financial burden on parents made attending the city school impracticable. In response to this community need, the local parent committee decided to build a school that could offer career training in Todos Santos. Even though the school was still under construction, sixty-six students were already enrolled, but their classes were taught in chicken coups converted into temporary classrooms. Once the school is finalized, the expectation is that more students will enroll and the curriculum will expand beyond the two careers offered: teaching and accounting. Hence, SIPA students were excited to make the school a reality by lending a helping hand.



This project complemented SIPA students' perspective on development. Students come to SIPA with a wealth of knowledge and experience from both the private and public sectors. One of SIPA's most popular concentrations is Economic and Political Development (EPD) and at our sister school, Teacher's College, many classes are offered with a specific focus on education in the development context. Combining academic knowledge with on-the-ground projects is the primary benefit of any field work. Our Alternative Spring Break was unique because it not only gave students a meaningful experience in the field of development, but combined that with the experience of working with a community.



A main objective of our Alternative Spring Break was to remind students that regardless of what their development project does, the community should always be the primary consultant and benefactor. Throughout the course of the project we learned about the history of the town, as well as the process of turning inorganic waste into buildings.



Todos Santos, as the people lovingly refer to themselves, had no waste management system in their town. The city dump was a hillside that sloped down into the local river, contaminating the water and surrounding crops. In the past, most of the garbage produced had been organic and biodegradable, so the custom was to either discard trash on the hillside or burn it. Unfortunately, once inorganic material like plastic bottles and bags were introduced, getting rid of trash became difficult and a health risk. This motivated the bottle school project. It would not only recycle the bottles, but would keep inorganic trash out of the dump. Instead of using traditional cinder-blocks for the construction, using plastic bottles produces "eco-blocks" that offer an eco-friendly and economical alternative. The bottles are tied to chicken wire, which holds the cement and fortifies the walls. This makes for a safe structure, the safety of which has been verified by independent structural analysis.





Seeing is believing, though. Hug It Forward had been working hard to finish the computer lab for the new school, but only the frame of the building had been built when we showed up. Weather conditions had slowed down the construction. Many of the Todos Santos were skeptical of us; They weren't sure if we were just another tourist group coming to take pictures of the men in candy-cane colored pants or the women's ornate, woven blouses, better known as traje or the traditional dress. Yet through the course of the week, the Todos Santos came to see our dedication to development in their town.

Students stayed with host families, took Spanish classes, learned about local history and even shared a short Spanish/English lesson with students from the first accounting class of Todos Santos. Students became immersed in the local culture and became part of the community while working on the school. More importantly, we quickly lost the title of "tourist". Many couldn't believe we would take a vacation to work, but they were happy to hear that we had come to help finish the school. In the end, it was not SIPA students who were taking pictures. In only a week the tables had turned; students and community leaders were taking pictures of us and our work as the first bottle school took form and their dreams of a high school became a reality.



One week doesn't seem like much time, but for SIPA students and the Todos Santos community, it was just enough time to realize the similarities we share and the powerful changes we can make if we work together.