

Gap Year Volunteering Write Up- Georgia Gibson 2018

In January, with the help of my scholarship grant, I travelled to a beautiful town located on the Colombian coast to volunteer at a foundation I have to confess I knew near to nothing about. I came across Fundación Mariposas Amarillas whilst scouring the internet for things to do on my travels. I had already vetoed doing anything with a gap year organisation, however recommendable they may be, as I was keen to find a small grassroots foundation where I would be able to really make a difference and practise my Spanish. The first thing you see when opening the website for Fundación Mariposas Amarillas is the beaming smile of a little girl staring back at you. On further reading you realise that smile is due to the fact that this little girl from a poor neighbourhood in Santa Marta is able to escape the streets for a few hours a day surrounded by similar beaming little smiles. What was more, it was clear that the foundation itself was scarce on resources and volunteers and had even put a note on their website saying that they had not been able to run many classes due to shortage of staff. I got in contact with the founder, Oskar, one of, and I can confirm this now after working with him, the most humble and altruistic men I have ever met. Having grown up with near to nothing on the streets of a poor pueblo in Colombia he has now devoted his life to saving children from similar predicaments, getting very little in return. After doing a lot of research (safety wise) it was booked, and three flights and about 27 hours later my friend and I were balancing on a rickety bus to our homestay in Santa Marta.

We arrived during the end of the summer holidays, so the first time we stepped foot in the foundation was to scrub down the table chairs windows and walls to clear the tremendous amount of dust and dirt that had accumulated over the Christmas break, as well as to write posters to advertise the school that we would stick in neighboring shops. This wasn't the kind of place that had its own cleaning staff let alone promotion team. What was clear from the start was that the foundation relied wholeheartedly on the help of the volunteers, without them, they often simply could not run.

My first proper day with the children was not how I expected at all. Having done some previous volunteering in primary education I was aware that it often takes a bit of time to develop close relationships with children and I thought faced with a very gringo looking stranger most would be apprehensive and timid at first. However this was not the case at all. As soon as I arrived on my second day I was met by a stampede of hugs and smiles like those from the pictures. Their capacity for immediate trust and kindness, all keen to welcome me and introduce themselves, was the first of many things that moved me during the experience. The children were aged between 4 and 12, but their age very much did not match their academic ability. Some of the 6 year olds could read whilst a few 11 year olds did not know even how to write their own name. It has to be said, the ones that could do both well (and that was few of them) were very keen to show me. Imagine that, a 10 year old showing off about how he can read (without much help) the first page of 'Elma la elefante'.

In terms of what we did whilst we were there, as previously mentioned it really was up to us. Elga, the co-founder was also there but she was keen to let us take the reins, no doubt exhausted, as she told us they had not received many volunteers that year. Islay and I would take it turns to work with the more advanced children or those that struggled a bit more and with the help of books, instruments, and arts and crafts we helped to teach them English, maths, geography, music, art or whatever else we were feeling on a particular day. The children were so excited and receptive to whatever activity we thought of that for the most

part it wasn't hard keeping them engaged. There was one moment, however, when I had exhausted the amount of games you could possibly invent with a single maraca that I have to say I resorted to telling a group of wide eyed listeners that the tooth on my necklace (I know, how gap year) was that of a shark, the key was to a treasure chest and my granny was in fact a mermaid, after which I had them all seated in silence around me taking it in turns to ask me about how often I tended to fight with sharks and whether I too grew a tail in water. Another one of my favourite things to do was to bring my speakers and dance with them to the Latin American top 40 charts, all of which, to my amusement, they knew off by heart. People often say how dance is a universal language, but having lived in Spain for 2 months and Latin America for 3 its hard not to emerge thinking that us English are pretty illiterate in comparison. Even the smallest children had this incredible sense of rhythm and movement. Music and dance really is central to life there, it's hard to pass a shop or house that doesn't have reggaeton's pulsating beat pounding out through speakers or people on patios pit pattering their feet. This all serves as another example of how people just get on with things and how smiles suffice to sustain them through their shortages, they make it all just part of the dance. Yes they may not be able to do simple things we take for granted, like celebrate their children's birthdays "por falta de plata" (lack of silver) as one little girl told me after I asked what she was going to do the following day for her 10th birthday, but that does not seem to stop their dance.

Another aspect I found particularly moving was the boundless nature of their dreams despite the very limited truth of their surroundings. One girl told me how she wanted to go to medical school in England become a doctor and look after the people of her pueblo, whilst another wanted to own hotels so he could stay in one. The truth was, I have no doubt that if they had had the privileges that I have been so randomly blessed with, even in so little as going to a proper school, they could have achieved all that and more, some really were amazingly academically curious and quick minded, it really astounded me (due to the lack of any formal teaching they'd received). But living where they did where the sentence "falta de plata" comes out of a 9 year olds mouth as normally as if she was telling me her name, it's devastating unlikely that any of them will be able to do so.

Volunteering at Fundación Mariposas Amarillas was one of the most rewarding experiences of my life. In the grand scheme of things we gave them very little in terms time, classes and such things but from the reaction of the children it was clear that one man's little is another's a lot. Saying goodbye to the children on our last day was truly very sad and to this day I miss their radiant faces, poignant humble honesty, eager excitement and of course the number of hugs I got on a daily basis.

