

“DOCTORA”: MY EXPERIENCE IN ECUADOR

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A stray dog barking. Children’s laughter in the streets. Cars honking as if they were talking to each other. The clinking of silverware. The shuffling of feet. This is a short list of the myriad sounds echoing through my memories of Ecuador. However, what I saw in this country cannot be described, replayed or reenacted with mere words. I have to be selfish for a moment and tell you why I decided to go on this trip. I didn’t want medicine; I wanted the culture of medicine. I wanted to know where and how people lived. What was important to them? What do they value? I witnessed my first delivery and bull-fight! I was taught how to dance Bachata and drink Canelazo like a local, but these encounters are just a taste of what I was given the privilege of experiencing. Despite knocking off numerous items on my bucket list, I want to share a story with you. It is an adventure that made me realize two things that seem so simple, but are often overlooked: positivity and teamwork. You may laugh and think to yourself, “This medical student was in Ecuador taking care of patients for almost 2 weeks, and this is what she got out of it?” Yes, it absolutely is, and I could not be happier with my free souvenirs.

We spent the first couple of days in Quito, where Dr. Rodríguez’s family graciously opened their home to two medical students and an additional family of five (bathroom time was oh, so precious). Over breakfast one morning we discussed our next move—the festival. Our trip, Dr. Rodríguez explained to me, coincided with the Alausí festivals—a weekend of bull running, bull fighting, fireworks, and singing and dancing. Alausí held a special place in the Rodríguez family’s heart, and I couldn’t wait to see patients and experience the festivities.

Our first stop was Simbambe, a small town in the Chimborazo province of Ecuador. I cannot speak of Simbambe without mentioning our one and only house call. A woman was concerned about her son, but he was too fragile to make the trip to our clinic. I opened the



REMEMBERING ECUADOR

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door and had to move cotton sheets out of my way. There was no electricity, and the house was very dark and dusty inside. Suddenly, I was being gazed upon by three pairs of precious eyes. “Lo siento...I’m sorry,” the mother said as she whisked her other children away from the room. As we turned the corner, we met her 16 year-old son. He was lying down, rolled up in numerous blankets, and very still. His eyes were closed, but his mouth was slightly open; drool ran from the side of his mouth. His mother wiped it away and stroked his jet black hair. Celia, a Spanish medical student, translated for us. She was sad, lonely, and worried about her son. He didn’t eat. His father was hardly home. She was worried about her other children. She had no friends. I heard the words “hydrocephalus” and “brain damage.”

Even as a first year medical student, I knew this woman did not have an easy road ahead. We tried to explain to her that

his health was in God’s hands, and that the most important thing she could do for him was to make him comfortable. As I held back tears, there was a small voice behind me; her oldest daughter was offering us two large plates of corn and cheese. I thanked her but couldn’t hold back my tears anymore. Here we were, three complete strangers in this brave woman’s home, and after explaining to her that her son won’t likely live to see his next birthday, they were offering us food. My emotions took over as I saw handmade cards and colored paper in the shape of hearts hanging over his bed. I could see that this boy was loved. He was not seen as a burden and his siblings didn’t resent him. There was no battle for attention. All there was in that household was love and understanding. “You must stay positive and strong for your three beautiful, healthy children,” we explained to her. I could see how much her heart was breaking for her sickly son,



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but she knew how much her other children needed her. She thanked us all, and we said our goodbyes. In broken Spanish I tried to tell her that I would never forget her and her family.

Each member of our team offered this woman something, and not just something to make her feel better or temporarily alleviate her pain. Dr. Moore, a plastic surgeon with years and years of experience and a special interest in children, explained to her what other doctors could not. Virginia, Dr. Rodríguez’s niece, prayed with her and stayed with her for a few hours after our visit to talk and let her know she had a friend. I hugged her and helped her put her son back into bed after examining him. I covered his cold, thin toes with a warm blanket. I told her eldest daughter how proud her mother is, and that she is her biggest helper. Dr. Rodríguez came and took a look at his medical papers, and discussed resources that could help her

situation. We all consoled her and thanked her for letting us into her home, into such an intimate part of her life.

As physicians we want to solve problems and find cures. But in a place like Simbambe, where resources and clinicians are so limited, you have to do your best with what you have. You have to stay positive regardless of how helpless or lost you may feel. You have to work together to help others. I cannot tell you how many times a woman or man walked up to me, held my hands in theirs, and said “Gracias, Doctora.” Gratitude is what makes me want to return to Ecuador. Gratitude is universal. No matter what language you speak, people know when you are trying to help. And for some people, your help is all they have. ■