

# NOTES FROM THE ROAD

You are invited to journey with YAP's three Monmouth University International Social Work interns as they traverse three countries doing field work. Ashley Terleski, Rachel A. Forbes and Bree Meduna joined the YAP team in September 2009 working in New Jersey and Pennsylvania to support our sister agencies in Sierra Leone and Guatemala, the International Youth Advocacy Federation and general YAP international endeavors. This dynamic group developed a research project that they launched in February 2010. In February, Ashley, Rachel and Bree began orientation in their field sites of Sierra Leone, Guatemala, and New Jersey. In March and April, the venturesome researchers conducted focus groups simultaneously, pioneering an entirely new track of international internships with YAP.

Coupling travel with an eye on social justice and making the VOICES of vulnerable youth heard, the field study joins the YAP and Monmouth mutual missions nicely. Via the "Travelogue Project," Ashley, Rachel and Bree wrote blogs about their experience as North Americans traveling abroad, their cross-cultural exchanges and opportunities, a first-hand account of the political and social climates the youth they work with contend with and simply the adventure that travel promises. You are invited to participate in the adventure by subscribing to *Notes from the Road*. Join Ashley in Freetown and Mile 91 for "Notes from Sierra Leone," Rachel in Guatemala City and Antigua for "Notes from Guatemala" and Bree in Camden and Essex for "Notes from New Jersey." Invite the youth in your YAP program to read along and post comments and questions for the audacious interns and for the young people they are working with on-site. Whatever corner of the globe this finds you in, travel along on this YAP/Monmouth venture by reading *Notes from the Road*.







## NOTES FROM SIERRA LEONE

My name is Ashley Terleski. I am a graduate student at Monmouth University in the International and Community Development track in the School of Social Work. I just turned 23 years old, grew up in Salem, Oregon, and recently finished my BSN at Azusa Pacific University near Los Angeles. I started interning for Youth Advocate Programs, Inc. in September.



## NOTES FROM GUATEMALA

My name is Rachel Forbes. I am 23-years-old and graduate student at Monmouth University in Long Branch, New Jersey. I received my undergraduate degrees from Loyola University in Baltimore City, Maryland in psychology and Spanish. I grew up in Belmar, New Jersey. I am currently studying international and community development (M.S.W.) and interning at Youth Advocate Programs, Inc. The following travelogue is a documentation of a field site visit to Guatemala City, Guatemala where I worked with at-risk youth who live in the streets and face extreme violence.



## NOTES FROM NEW JERSEY

Hi, my name is Bree. I'm a Senior Graduate Student at Monmouth University in New Jersey. My program is International and Community Development in Social Work. I have been interning with Youth Advocate Program, Inc. (YAP) since September, 2009. Through YAP, I have been given a great opportunity to experience different cultural beliefs about youth and varying degrees of action in response to the at-risk youth population.

# Notes from Sierra Leone

## “Who Am I?”

Some of you may have attended the International Workshop at the National Leadership Conference back in November, if you did, thank you! You would have seen me briefly present on Sierra Leone (I was the one with the excessive hand motions).

For everyone else let me quickly introduce myself, my name is Ashley Terleski, I am a graduate student at Monmouth University in the International and Community Development track in the School of Social Work. I just turned 23 years old, grew up in Salem, Oregon, and recently finished my BSW at Azusa Pacific University near Los Angeles. I started interning for Youth Advocate Programs, Inc. in September. It has been an amazing experience so far and I have learned much about YAP, the work they do, and the passion of the people who work together through this organization to partner with youth and create a better world with them. This project was born out of the desire by YAP to do a research project with the youth both nationally and in their sister agencies abroad. It is three-fold in purpose: as a needs assessment, program evaluation, and advocacy tool. The research will hopefully be the groundwork for other projects, changes, and advocacy efforts all focused in areas that are identified by the youth who participate. I have the joy and privilege of traveling to Sierra Leone to partner with Sanusi Kargbo, the program director of Sierra Leone Youth Advocate Programs (SLYAP), to help conduct focus groups with the youth at Mile 91.

This will be my first trip to Africa and the longest time I have spent abroad. This travelogue is an invitation for you to join in my journey through this experience. It will not only be a way to stay updated on the work that is being done, both my work and what Sanusi and his team are doing, but also to hear about what it is like for me, as a foreigner, to experience a vastly different culture and country. It is an opportunity to engage with me through my stories, emotions, sarcasm, and occasionally self-deprecating humor. We all know that as someone in another country you are bound to do something culturally ridiculous that will make everyone laugh at you, so to be only fair I'll make sure to share those stories on here so you can all laugh at me too. I'll be putting up videos and pictures for everyone to see as well. I also ask, no, plead, that you comment, ask questions, and just engage in conversation with me through this blog, since let's face it, it's boring to feel like your talking to yourself for 10 weeks.

With that "official" introduction said I have to say I write this after having spent days out shopping for all my traveling "essentials". My kitchen table is littered with zone bars, bug spray, textbooks, and malaria pills...all sorts of pills actually, I've never owned this much medication in my life. I am realizing how fragile my body is as an American, I can't eat or drink water in another country without an array of medications. (Don't worry all of you concerned for my safety, I will take them). To pin down my emotional experience of preparing to leave and adequately express it is near impossible, I am hopeful, excited, contemplative, stressed, anxious, nervous (largely about bugs, if you are lucky I will have a good abnormal bug story to share with you all, I have a odd history with those little devilish creatures) and above all I am fighting my general tendency to over-pack! I am trying to not take expectations with me, but the humble and sharing spirit of a learner and a friend. With all that said, let me end with this

*Adventure is a path. Real adventure - self-determined, self-motivated, often risky - forces you to have firsthand encounters with the world. The world the way it is, not the way you imagine it. Your body will collide with the earth and you will bear witness. In this way you will be compelled to grapple with the limitless kindness and bottomless cruelty of human kind - and perhaps realize that you yourself are capable of both. This will change you. Nothing will ever again be black-and-white.*

-- Mark Jenkins





## “Things I Have Learned in Freetown”

1. Never leave anything sweet out—red ants will attack.
2. Don't wear camouflage clothing—it is illegal and they might demand that you take it off right there in the middle of the street and hand it over.
3. Most Sierra Leoneans love rice and pepper—expect to have rice and something spicy with each meal.
4. There is such a thing as peanut-butter soup—yes it's good, no it tastes nothing like peanut butter.

My first few days in Freetown have been many things! Culture shock has taken its toll and I'm slowly adjusting, you know getting the hang of bathing out of a bucket, eating African food (I've been an adventurous orderer and got pepper soup my first day, it was good but it was so hot I couldn't eat much because of how much water I ended up drinking), and trying to overcome my fear of bugs! Luckily ants aren't on my list of bugs I fear, because the second day I got home to find one of my suitcases infested with them! They were everywhere! I had left a piece of chocolate in my suitcase, zipped up in one of the pockets and those suckers found it and were having a field day—unfortunately for them it also led to their demise. I just kept thinking in my head "Stupid American!" for leaving chocolate in my bag. Cockroaches and spiders are still on that fearful list and I've seen exceptionally large and fast species of both already.

Freetown was overwhelming at first. It was made for half-a-million people and now hosts 2 million. It is the most crowded place I have ever seen; it puts NYC to shame I feel. Also they say New York is the city that never sleeps...nope, it's this city. About the third night here, when the electricity went out and it was extremely hot, I woke up every half hour or hour during the night and every time I did I could hear plenty of people still out and about on the street.

In my first few days here I am seeing how much SLYAP does! In Freetown there is a more traditional YAP program, with a focus on mentoring, and support for schools and children to go to school -- usually through the financial assistance for school fees or books. People are soliciting Sanusi [Kargbo], the program director constantly for help. On Monday we went to assess a school that was asking for help in building a new schoolhouse. Their previous one had been destroyed in the last rainy season and they have been using a wealthy person's unfinished home as a school. Now that the person wants to finish their house they are being evicted within a week. So they are quickly trying to put up another structure.

Sanusi and I went and looked at the building to see what SLYAP could afford to do to help, he decided on the zinc -- or sheet metal for the walls and roof. Supporting projects like these is a



difficult decision. There is need everywhere, and important, valid need, and every choice you make to help one person, means someone else does not get help. And not just this imaginary someone in space, but someone in front of you, with a story you know, and needs that you see. That or it is even at the cost of your own program and the needs of those being served by it. This usually means that for many situations, including this one, donations will partially be made out of employees' own pockets.

I was asked what are some of my goals when I am over here. The main intention over here on a work aspect is that of running focus groups with the youth, both in Freetown and at Mile 91. The groups are going to be a forum where the youth will be able to have the opinions, ideas, and stories heard and this will help guide further YAP and SLYAP activity. So the main goal is to successfully run those. After getting here another main goal is to LEARN KRIO! It is a frustrating language barrier, especially when there is so much English in it that you are able to pick up bits and pieces and then get completely lost again. A significant goal is to learn, and to learn many things: learn about the culture of Sierra Leone, about SLYAP and how it works, and also about my role in all of this -- what actions to take in my own life, what is the role of the U.S. foreigner internationally? If I want a career as an "international social worker" what is the most beneficial way to do that? And finally, another goal is to build relationships, to make friends and connect with people, to share life in this brief time that I am here. If there is one thing I have been learning this past year it is the importance of human connection. I have spent the majority of my time here with two women, Melrose and Thanya. Both have been incredibly welcoming and sweet! Melrose has already bought me fabric to have an Africanus dress made for me; she was shocked I did not have one already.

Thanks for the comments so far and not making me feel like I'm talking to myself!! I'll probably keep responding in the main body of the blog since it's a major pain to try and post multiple things due to the internet being so slow. I have several more stories and shall write about them soon!

## “The Real Face of Poverty”

When we think of poverty in the United States we tend to think of the homeless, people living in cars or shelters, going to soup kitchens in order to eat a good meal that day, etc. We don't know poverty like this; we don't see slums stretching for shack after shack.



I am not trying to take away from the plight of the poor in the U.S.; poverty in any form is something to fight against. In the U.S., though, we almost seem to hide our poor; we don't want the world to know our people suffer, too. Here there is no

hiding. Thanya took me to a slum last week. There is one right in the center of town, where the road dips down and there is a flat stretch of land closer to sea level. Running through the middle is a black creek of sheer filth; its banks pure trash with hogs sifting through. When the homes (which can be labeled shacks in structure while in reality they are homes) end, it opens to a wide expanse that is a sea of trash and debris leading to the ocean. This is the children's playground, a place infested with insects, disease, and scavenging animals. Most of us are used to clean environments; having more than one spider in your house a week is practically an infestation.

For those of you who have seen the film *Slumdog Millionaire*, it was like walking into that film and the slums there, though I would even argue that the structures here were far worse than the ones in the film. It is a weird feeling to be there and part of me almost resents films like *Slumdog Millionaire* in a way. On one side they open up people's eyes to poverty in the world, and on the other they almost desensitize you. So that when you see it in person, you just feel like you stepped into a movie, as if it is not actually real. But there it is, around you, and these children aren't actors; they don't call it a day's work, go home to comfortable lives, and then end up on a red carpet winning Oscars. This is their home: these piles of trash their toys, this infested creek and ocean their swimming pool, or shower even. Then there is the emotion of where I am, almost like a tourist in their homes. I see it. The children chase after me chanting, "Whiteman! Whiteman!", but then I leave, and what do I do? What changes? I get to leave. I get to go back to fans, electricity, floors -- heck, there's even a real shower in the home I'm at right now.

Thanya pointed out that many of the children who SLYAP mentors are from these slums. She also explained how this slum came to be. During the war many, many people came from the countryside to the city seeking refuge. Most of the fighting took place in the provinces, though eventually it came to Freetown, as well. After the war most of the people stayed and did not return to the countryside. Urbanization has been a trend and the war caused an extremely high amount of people moving to the city in a short amount of time. There was no way for the job market, infrastructure, and everything else to keep up, especially during and after the war! The government is trying to convince the people to move out of the slum, because this one in particular is incredibly dangerous. Every rainy season the slum floods from the now "creek" (it is the tail end of the dry season right now) running through it. Children every year get swept out to sea during these floods and drown. And let's not even get into the effect on the ocean itself! The amount of trash on the "beach" is insane and I can't even imagine how polluted the water must be near there. Environmentalists would have a panic attack. But the question is, where do all these people move to? Do they have places to go? There are so many challenges. I often keep hearing "It is difficult here" and "This is Africa," but was this always "Africa"? Does this always have to be "Africa"? I want to leave you with encouraging words, words that I received from someone else, to be honest, because you cannot depress people and then not encourage them; otherwise, we would all just give up and never work to change anything. And I still believe in change. So...

*Hold on to what is good,  
even if it is  
a handful of earth.  
Hold on to what you believe  
even if it is  
a tree which stands by itself.  
Hold onto what you must do  
even if it is  
a long way from here.*  
-- Nancy Wood



P.S. Thanks for the comments again! Dad, Mile 91 is a village out in the provinces; it's about a 3 to 4 hour drive outside of Freetown. Heather and Gretchen, I still haven't gotten the dress made yet! I was supposed to Saturday but I got caught up with a mild problem - which I'll explain in the next blog! But I'll be sure to put up pictures when I do!

## “Fears I Have Faced in Freetown”

1. Having my blood drawn
2. Getting an IV
3. Being hospitalized!!!

Yep, that's right, I got sick already! Obviously I am alive and well writing this, so no need for anyone to worry, anymore at least. Those may seem like silly fears to you, but honestly I have never been sick enough to warrant any of these things and they have always frightened me. I've never even donated blood before because I'm so afraid of having my blood drawn. And so lucky for me the first time for everything is in Africa.

This past Saturday I took the day to stay home and do homework. Sanusi was going into town, but Abu, his house servant that lives with him, was home studying, as well. (Having a "house servant" is a cultural thing here. For Abu, Sanusi pays for his schooling and Abu helps around the house and lives there in return.) Not too long after I got up, though, I felt weak and achy so I decided to just rest instead. I also had no appetite. I ended up calling Sanusi to let him know I felt ill. He advised me to try and eat something. I agreed, but stayed in bed and kept telling myself in another hour and going back to sleep. Abu kept coming in and telling me to eat something and when the mayor's wife, Victoria, sent down food for me, I finally agreed to get up because I felt I had to. I still wasn't hungry and couldn't bring myself to touch the food she sent. Instead, I attempted orange juice. Two painful sips in I suddenly realized I was lying back onto the chairs and could hear Abu and a couple other boys I hadn't met yelling things. They lifted me up and I barely realized I had fainted before waking up again in their arms, having passed out twice in a row. They laid me down on the couch and called the mayor's wife. She came down and wanted to take me to the hospital, but due to the above-mentioned fears I worked to persuade her to not take me. I know, I know, I'm an idiot, but I was feeling a bit better and managed to eat a little food while she was there. But in going through all my symptoms, she and the boys thought I had malaria. Oh, that forbidden, horrifying word to all of us Westerners.

Sanusi was now on his way home having been informed by Abu about the change in my condition, so Victoria and her adorable daughter, who had run all the way to the house because she wanted to see how I was, left while I waited. Of course in this waiting I progressively got worse and my system rejected the meager meal I had attempted to eat. It was official: to the hospital I was going, and by then I was ready to go, too. They

took me to the nicest hospital in Freetown, which of course is nothing like U.S. standards, but if it was malaria they would know how to treat it correctly.

First fear: I got my blood drawn by this nice Indian man, who was very understanding of me being freaked out. Most of the doctors here were from India (not sure why). I'll be honest, this was not bad at all; it was probably the same pain level as getting a shot, and I realize I was being a big baby. They got me into my room, which was actually much larger than any U.S. hospital room I have ever seen, and it had a TV, but more importantly, air conditioning! Yet here I had to face my second fear - the IV. I can officially say, I HATE THE IV. I feel that my fear is justified and they suck and that needle will encourage me to be extremely safe about not getting sick again more than the illness itself. The second day with the IV was worse than being sick; it hurt so badly whenever one of the nurses touched it. The nurses were incredibly nice, though, always understanding and sweet, and the quickest I have ever seen to respond to that little bell. After having witnessed other friends' experiences in hospitals and having to go and track down nurses for them, I was extremely grateful for this!



I spent a couple nights in the hospital, re-hydrating and waiting for the results of my blood test to come back to see if I actually had malaria, which was what I was being treated for and what everyone was leaning towards me having. Lucky for me the test came back and I do not have malaria!! But I have typhoid. It is a low percentage of typhoid, though. You know how I mentioned that I had been an adventurous sort and was trying lots of African food? That did not work out in my favor. The doctor said it was not only the food itself but also the drastic change in diet from what I'm used to. So now I have to try and eat more "American" food that I am used to. I went to the store last night and bought PB & J, cereal, pasta and marinara sauce. I should be fine, but due to the doctor's and all of YAP's concern, my trip is being modified. I will be coming home a month early and will no longer go to Mile 91 for an extended period of time. They fear the longer I stay, the more at risk I am to get sick again and the next time it would be worse. I remember a James Michener quote I had seen about traveling that is now much more ironic to me: "If you reject the food, ignore the customs, fear the religion and avoid the people, you might better stay at home." I think I'd be more careful about that food statement now, though, unless you're wanting a stay in the hospital.



## “Education for the Privileged Few”

I met with a group of students at a school SLYAP supports at the end of last week. It is challenging to learn how to build trust with youth from a different culture whom you have just met, but I am learning. This group revealed to me just how important SLYAP is in their lives. When I asked what should be changed they said to expand! They want more SLYAP. They want the rest of the youth in Freetown to be able to experience the benefits of being involved with SLYAP.

In talking about current needs, education came up over and over again; it was the prevailing theme. I have witnessed this need through my observations, as well. The children and youth are long-ing to go to school so badly; they desire education. It is the clearest path they see to deliverance from the grasp of poverty. But there are so many barriers, mainly financial. In this country, as in many in Africa, the children are required to pay fees for school. And while the fees are small to us in U.S. dollars, to a fam-ily in Sierra Leone in poverty they are astronomical. And it is not only the fees to go to school they must pay for; on top of that there is the uniform, the books, lunches, exams, etc. The price climbs higher and higher, leaving the poor behind, leaving the children with no option but to spend their days and nights selling bread, water, other small goods in the market and on the streets, or to eventu-ally sell their bodies on the street, as well.



One morning when I got up Sa-nusi informed me there was a woman outside of the house with her son; the woman had been crying and crying. Her son was not going to be able to take a test that would allow him to proceed in school because she did

not have the money to pay for it. She had brought his report card with her that showed how her son was near the top of his class. So in order to make sure that the woman was telling the truth, we all loaded into the truck and drove to the boy's school. There the teacher confirmed the situation and Sanusi paid for the test. And this is how things go: crisis intervention for education. The importance of education is immeasurable; it is linked to getting out of poverty, closing the gap between the "haves" and "have-nots," and lowering the risk of getting HIV/AIDS, amongst many other things. SLYAP intervenes, in regards to education, on two levels: in providing financial support for students and supporting the schools

This is a whole other issue; the schools themselves suffer from poor funding. There was a recent issue here where teachers were not getting paid. Or they get paid so little that some do not come to class and instead tell the children to come to their homes for pri-vate lessons that they have to pay extra for. Teachers will also create pamphlets for their classes that they force the students to buy as a way to make up for the poor salaries they are re-ceiving. While it is not right for the teachers to be doing these things, it needs to be stated the teachers are themselves victims of the system, as well. It is because they are making hardly anything, sometimes only \$40 a month, that they resort to these ways of supplementing their income. I visited one of the schools that SLYAP supports. Every classroom was filled to the brim with children. Because they did not have the money to expand their buildings, and even though they have the land, they are forced to fit two classes into each classroom and the teachers rotate in-structing their perspective classes. Talk about a difficult learning environment: children crammed into tiny benches in dark rooms with fifty or more other children and only half of the time teaching is even geared towards you.



Campaigns to abolish school fees have been working hard to repair these maladies, in Africa and other continents. And there have been cases of success. Stephen Lewis speaks eloquently upon this issue and

ways to fight for free, quality education for children everywhere. It is their right, and it needs be fought for, by them and by us who advocate for them. So I just can not simply end this without quoting something by Stephen Lewis. After writing this I felt this was fitting, and ironic in a way, as well:

*I often wonder, in an increasingly jaded way, how long the children of Africa will have to wait before the world delivers. You can't begin to imagine the numbers of reports that have been produced demonstrating the needs of orphan children and demanding the abolition of school fees...In fact, an argument has been made that the reports have become a kind of Machiavellian delaying tactic. You want action? Wait - there's something else to read.*  
-- Stephen Lewis, Race Against Time.



## “A Walk to the Well”

This week I went to Mile 91, the village where SLYAP has a youth center and a school. Whoever named Mile 91 must have been lacking in creativity that day; it bears that name because it is 91 miles outside of Freetown. This was the first time I truly was able to get outside of the city and I was very excited to see the provinces.

I'll admit it, in a touristy way I was secretly hoping to see some "African" animals; you know, the rogue elephant wandering across the road, or a monkey at least. Unfortunately, I was disappointed. I saw no animals except lizards and the giant mouse that greeted me in my room at the guesthouse.

Mile 91 is a larger village, with a perfectly paved highway branching through it. It is an interesting picture of development, to look out and see a highway similar to what we have in the U.S. flanked with homes made



from mud and sticks. I do not think many people who live in Mile 91 drive, much less own a car. If you cannot afford to use cement bricks to build a home, I don't think a vehicle is on the top of your "things I need to buy" list. The highway is not all that much of a benefit to them, except now cars can race by at much quicker speeds right next to where their children are playing. It just stood out as an example of times when "development" is more for the rich and not the poor.

I got to meet some of the youth and talk with a few students at the youth center, after playing a game of foosball where around five people were playing and another three were helping to keep the table together! It was very insightful to talk with them and get a picture of their lives and the struggles they face. One boy spoke to me about how everything he owns fits into one box. He lives with his aunt, who he says does not care about him. For him the headmaster at the school is like a father he turns to for help. He was actually repeating the grade he was in for the second time -- not because of an inability to pass, but because he did not have the money to move on. The school that SLYAP provides does not charge school fees, but right now it is only able to provide primary education.

It was in speaking with the girls, though, that I was really hit hard by their plight. The children are usually the family members that go to fetch the water daily. The girls explained to me that a few months into the dry season the wells near their homes dry up, so they are forced to walk a couple miles into the bush to get water. This is already an issue in itself. Can you imagine when you were 10 years old walking 2-3 miles everyday just to get your water? But the real upsetting part was that they are afraid people will "snatch" them. By snatching they mean rapists, pedophiles, and at times people who will forcefully induct them into the secret societies. The tradition of the secret societies runs deep and is an important part of the culture in Sierra Leone, but unfortunately one of their traditional practices is female genital mutilation. This is what these young ladies have to face, just to get their water! We go turn on a faucet, and they have to fear getting raped. A new, deeper well that will flow all year long is desperately needed in Mile 91. I just cannot accept that these girls have to keep going through this. I did not even ask if any of them had been "snatched" themselves, for fear of bringing up something very traumatic for them. But they very well could have been, and looking into their young, beautiful faces my heart just cannot let me be okay with this. I refuse to walk away and forget them. Before anything else, the safety of these children comes first. I am limited in resources here, but I would like to start to brainstorm about a way to get a new well built there, through some combination of fundraising, contacting other charitable organizations that build wells, and putting pressure on the government here. I think this is something that the YAP family could join together on to help provide for this village. There are several logistical things that will need to be figured out, but I wanted to put out the call to everyone to see what we can do to provide these girls with a greater level of safety. Please let me know if you have any connections, know of any organizations that could help, or possible fundraising ideas! How could we even get the youth in the U.S. programs involved in efforts to make this happen for the sake of these girls in Mile 91? Something so simple can make such a vast impact on these girls' lives, and save them from horrible things no one should have to be a victim of.



## “The Heart of SLYAP Youth”

This past week has been a whirlwind and my usual daily relationship with my computer was quite neglected. This week YAP staff, both current and former, came out to Sierra Leone; unfortunately for them they had not been informed that March is the hottest month in Sierra Leone. They jumped into the most sweltering week I've had since being here. There's no temperature gauges anywhere to inform me just how hot. But, if judging by how long after I take my shower to when I wish I could take another one, I know it has to be a ridiculously high temperature and humidity level. How people cope and function in this heat is astounding to me.

We went to Mile 91 again on Wednesday. It was quite different than my first experience. I happened to go during a short time period where the youth center was not being used to its fullest potential. This was quite the reverse on Wednesday. There were so many people there! They were throwing a party in our honor. They had a DJ there, with stacks of giant speakers playing music for the children to dance to, and how they love to dance! I had flashbacks of being in middle or grade school and dancing was walking around in a circle holding someone at arm's length. I feel like I am in a music video watching these kids dance. The way they dance is incredible! Even the little kids! Some of the kids I befriended on my last trip got me to get out there and dance with them a little bit. You can only handle the embarrassment of getting shown up by 6-year-olds for so long.

The children and youth at Mile 91 will steal your heart. They are vibrant and lively. One small boy decided to claim me as his for the day and stuck by my side half the time holding onto my hand. I find when I am able to play with a child the issues of cultural difference and language barriers suddenly become less significant. It was wonderful to see all the youth playing! Not only was there dancing, but they had a swing set and slide out. There was a constant line of about 20 kids waiting for a 4-foot slide. The foosball table was out and newly cleaned but still requiring three extra people to hold it together. Finally, there was the "bouncer," or as we call it a trampoline. I have to admit I broke the "one person jumping at a time" rule, after asking, and joined one of the boys I am friends with and "taught" him how sit-drops steal your bounce and make you fall over.

The youth center and school are both greatly beneficial to the community but there is still great need and room for much more to be done! The government is paying the teachers, but there are two who are still not being paid. SLYAP is working hard to have them added to the payroll. It is very difficult to try and do so much when your funding is so small, and it's incredible what they are able to achieve off of so little. There is a football team (or as we call it soccer), the youth center, the school, and an agricultural program that could use another lift. They used to be able to offer forms of vocational training, but due to lack of funds they are unable to provide these anymore, even though they would love to and have the connections to renew the programs if the funds were there. The youth center provides a safe place to play, has a peer mentoring program, and shows movies once a week as a reward for doing well in school for some youth. When there are a handful of TVs in town this works as a great motivator. The last week when I stayed the night, the guesthouse had a TV out in the front and there was a crowd of people, all just standing in front of it watching the music videos and dancing to them.



Leaving the children was sad; I wished I had been able to spend more time with them. I am left to wonder, will I ever see them again? Will things change? Will one of the precious girls be snatched? Will they be able

to continue their education? I am still left to find my role as a foreigner only here for a brief while, but I have discovered some efforts that I plan on taking to help these kids once I return to the U.S.

Rumi wrote once, "You were born with wings. Why prefer to crawl through life?" But sometimes people's wings get damaged, or malnourished, forces tie them down, or they were never told they have them in the first place. SLYAP's mission statement is "Empowering youths to be the rulers of their destiny." Maybe another way of seeing empowerment is letting people know that they have wings, working together to heal the damage, providing nourishment, fighting the forces, so that they can fly and not be kept crawling.

## “On the Island of Bonthe”

I think there is a rule in Africa that plans just simply never go as planned. This weekend the YAP staff, the director of SLYAP, and I joined Freetown's city council, including the mayor, on a trip to the island of Bonthe. The city council of the island and of Freetown agreed to do a form of exchange and to work together. The trip had been planned several times and this was finally the one that was going to make it. Details were vague but everyone was under the impression that Bonthe was only about a two-and-a-half-hour drive away, that it was a historical island with beautiful beaches, and we would be staying in a "luxury" resort. By luxury this typically means one with real showers, air conditioning, and a pool.

So six-and-a-half hours of driving and an hour-long rickety boat ride later, we landed on Bonthe. There were no beautiful beaches or luxury resorts in sight. Along our six-and-a-half-hour car ride, the air conditioning went out and we rolled down our windows in order to combat the heat. Unfortunately for us we were the second car in the caravan down four hours of dirt roads. So not only were we sticky and sweaty, but now caked with dust. We had been dreaming of showers for probably the last four hours by the time we showed up. At the dock we were greeted by a parade of people, with an APC banner (All People's Congress, the ruling political party) and traditional dancing. They paraded us down the streets to a guesthouse where the mayor was staying and they fed us a traditional meal. By the time the meal was finished we were dying to go to our guesthouse and get cleaned up. We already came to terms with the fact that the dreams of a pool and real showers were not going to become a reality.

We were greeted at the guesthouse by the manager, who was so drunk she almost fell over showing us to our rooms and had to lean against the wall for a while to stay upright. At this point all I could do was laugh. The whole situation was so opposite of what I had been expecting. But at the same time the unmet expectations were part of the point. Bonthe has been an extremely neglected island. No one on the council had ever been there and people did not realize how dilapidated it had become. It was the first

place hit by the slave trade, and it was hit hard. The main character from the movie *Amistad* was from Bonthe. Many of the colonial structures that the British built still stand throughout the city. Remnants of paved roads, electrical wires, and telephone wires all stand, but there are no cars, no electricity, and no telephones. Due to the neglect, all of this equipment has fallen into disrepair and is currently unusable. The mayor and city council there wanted the Freetown city council to come out to understand how neglected they have been and their difficulties in transportation. It took us around eight hours of traveling just to get there, making a giant cut through the country, when Bonthe is a direct shot down the coast of Sierra Leone from Freetown and could potentially be reached within a couple of hours by boat.

It truly is a beautiful island, though, and that night I got to experience my first monsoon-type rain. It was preceded by thunder and lightening and then suddenly sheets of rain poured from the sky. It only lasted about five minutes, and then as quick as it came it is gone. We took a tour of the island, along which I met someone's pet monkey named Jackie, who spun me around checking all my pockets.

It's amazing to see the century-old structures, some still standing. While some could potentially be refurbished, others have been left to mother nature. There are many stranded ships along the water that were left to rot and decompose. One currently has a large tree growing through it that we were told had been there for some 100 years. It was sad to see this island so neglected; it has so much to offer. They are rich in history and they are hoping to become a tourist destination. Tourism brings in a great amount of money and development; the people of Bonthe expressed aspirations to build up their island in such a way due to their history and the availability of big game sport fishing. Along their coasts are barracuda, marlin, and other large fish that I was unfamiliar with. They also are hoping to develop and gain income through the fishing industry and agriculture. All the resources are there. What is lacking is all the start-up cost funding. And people with an adventurous spirit who are willing to travel without expectations and into the unknown to discover places of history and beauty, such as Bonthe.





## “The Face of (Life and) Death”

Tuesday was my last full day in Sierra Leone. I went to the “youth center” in Freetown where the youth and community put on an informal program. Some of the youth involved in SLYAP put on a play for me. A couple artists came and performed, and the real crowd drawer was some cultural dancing! The play was an expression of how many of them became involved in SLYAP and how their lives were enriched by the opportunity to be educated by SLYAP. The performance expressed their gratitude towards the agency. I could see a genuine comfort for many of them in drama. One boy who rarely spoke was much more vocal and at home when doing the drama. Two of the eldest kids -- one an orphan who was found by SLYAP in the refugee camps and the other an ex-child soldier -- really thrived in this setting. I greatly enjoyed the performance, and was pleased that I could understand almost everything that they were saying! (Even though a volunteer still translated everything for me just in case I missed something.)



I realize something: I almost dislike using the term “ex-child soldier” to define the young man I just mentioned. Yes, that is his past and who he was. But that was not who I saw. The use of child soldiers

is something I have studied somewhat extensively. I am aware of the “recruitment” processes, the drugs and manipulation used to turn young children into killing machines, and the horrors that they have seen, as well as those that they have committed. When thinking about things later it was just crossing my mind that this young man has likely killed people, many people. His reputation was for being a respected and skilled fighter. He is currently 22, so he would have been 12 when the war ended. In one sense I am sitting and chatting with a “murderer,” but that thought never even crossed my mind when I was with him. Because that’s not who he is; he is a young man, still healing from a stolen childhood. But in all of my interactions with him he was friendly, hopeful, grateful, and a leader amongst his peers.

I wonder what his life would be like if after the war he had been treated like a criminal. If he had been a boy in the U.S. and murdered people he would have been sent to juvenile detention. Albeit, the circumstances under which a boy in the U.S. commits murder and a child soldier in Sierra Leone is different. But all the same, it is the environment that plays such a large factor in leading young people to commit acts of violence. Whether it is being abducted from your home, forced to take drugs, desensitized to violence and handed a gun and shoved on the frontlines of battle; or to be born into an impoverished, violent neighborhood, where gang life is the norm and almost necessary to remain protected. For this man he was fortunate to be viewed as a victim of his environment and to be found by organizations like SLYAP and others that helped in the rehabilitation process to gain his life back. Someone's past is not something to be ignored, but past experiences and possible mistakes should not have to become a brand or label you have to bear the rest of your life. I feel that is something YAP fights for nationally, for by keeping youth out of juvenile detention centers you help to save them from bearing the label “juvenile delinquent” or “criminal offender” and many more that come with a criminal record.



For this boy, he doesn't have a background report that shows up with the label “child soldier” on it every time he applies for a job. He is free to move through life without the label, and considering all the personal

and emotional scars his past has inflicted upon him, it would be doing him an injustice to add to his suffering by adding a label from which he cannot escape.

In thinking about these things and how the labels that youth may bear can cause them to view themselves as powerless to change, as nothing more than a “juvenile delinquent”, or a gang member, or an ex-child soldier, another great quote by Rumi comes to mind: You suppose you are the trouble, but you are the cure. You suppose that you are the lock on the door, but you are the key that opens it. It's too bad that you want to be someone else. You don't see your own face, your own beauty. Yet, no face is more beautiful than yours.

## “The Familiar Is Now Foreign”

Currently, I am sitting in the London Heathrow airport. It is already a form of shock, to jump from the sweat, filth, poverty, but albeit vibrancy of Freetown to such a sterile, sparkly environment. From where I sit Burberry, Gucci, Mulberry, and Jimmy Choo shops are all within eyesight. I wonder how one of the youth from Freetown who have never been out of Sierra Leone would react to seeing this place. I think some of them would be afraid to touch anything!

I have to say, the first thing I did was go on a search for the Starbucks that I know is in this airport. I know some of you coffee purists out there gasp at the mention of Starbucks; to be honest I know nothing of their coffee, but that Chai Latte can always be depended upon as a good drink. After working with my own concoctions the past couple of weeks that drink was bliss! (That and a chocolate croissant just made it even better.)

I never really noticed how people here really do love neutral shades and black. In my bright yellow t-shirt I feel way too vibrant for this atmosphere, compared to always feeling dull in Freetown because of how brightly the women were always dressed! It's a nice change to not be stared at by everyone who passes me by, but I'm not greeted by anyone, either. My experience was that people in Sierra Leone meet you once and they will remember you and greet you as a friend every time after that. The YAP staff commented that everywhere we went I knew someone, but so much of that is just the culture of Sierra Leone. In a city of two million people, everywhere you go you run into friends. I can go out in my hometown of not even half a million and never see anyone I know!

As my experience comes to a close it is interesting to reflect back on the two worlds that I have seen and been a part of whilst here. I was "roughing" it by American standards. Living without electricity most nights, waiting for the water tap to be turned on at night to fill my bath bucket for the next morning, no air conditioning in my room, and having cockroaches, mice, and spiders as house guests. What would feel like poverty to me in America is a very decent living situation here. I felt I was living in an almost non-existent middle/upper class and setting my feet in both the impoverished and wealthy sides of the society. One day I would spend walking through a slum or the craziness of the local market. I would spend time talking with youth and hearing their plights. Youth who were child combatants, who break rocks and sell the gravel as a living, fill bags with sand to sell, or fill jerry cans with

water and push them throughout the city where people purchase for almost nothing (about 13 cents each). Then the next evening I would be in the cool air-conditioned office of a government official or at an open-bar cocktail party hosted by a bank! There is no middle class here. It is the people at the bottom and those at the top. The disparity is stark. With an increase in education, more of a middle class is slowly beginning to emerge.

The main theme from all of my focus groups was the importance of education. That is why so much of SLYAP's work in Freetown is assisting children with school fees and support to schools in the area. SLYAP serves around 450 children, almost equally split between Mile 91 and Freetown. But there is still so many more in need of help. The government of Sierra Leone is running an anti-corruption campaign which is encouraging. Even while I was there I heard several times on the news of government ministers who were being indicted for corruption. As corruption decreases and the country gains back control of its resources, a push for more government assistance with education will be important. The CRC demands the rights of free primary education for all children, and that currently is not happening in the country. The work of SLYAP in the country is extremely important; all of the youth expressed immense gratitude towards SLYAP for their assistance so far, which included: provisions of school fees, books, uniforms, advocating for them when they run into legal trouble, helping them to find jobs, peer mentorship programs through the youth center at Mile 91, and everything else that is being done. It's amazing to see all that they do with so little, and to imagine what could be done with more.



# Notes from Guatemala

## “Guatemala City: Field Research Preparations & Site Visit Goals”

So it has been confirmed: I will travel to Guatemala City on March 7th. I have been taking the regular precautions for travel, purchasing travelers insurance, registering with the Embassy, getting the proper clothing for the trip, finalizing research logistics and making sure that I have all of coursework with me during my stay.

I spoke recently on the phone with the program director of Nuestros Derechos in Guatemala City, the YAP sister agency which will facilitate my stay. He very welcoming and informative and it seemed that we shared the same enthusiasm about the field site visit. While in Guatemala, I will be living with his family where I will be able to learn about Guatemalan culture and tradition, practice my Spanish speaking skills, and become acquainted with the work that he does with the street youth population in Guatemala City.

The first week of the stay I will be attending an international delegation YAP has co-organized with Nuestros Derechos, with the remainder of the stay dedicated to the possibility of having the focus group discussions with the street youth. The focus groups are essentially informal discussions which will be co-moderated by the Nuestros Derechos director and myself, where the street youth whom the organization serve can have a safe forum to express their views on social issues, the qualities of their daily existence, ways in which they are empowered, and perceived options for social change. The focus groups are a tool in collecting qualitative data within the participatory action research framework, which allows for youths to advocate for themselves in the creation of policies and programs which have the opportunity to better their existences.

The focus group discussions will draw samples from the larger population of street youth in Guatemala City, through access of the services which Nuestros Derechos has provided including schools and safe houses. The goal is to obtain first-hand information from the youth themselves to best represent current needs in policy development, and to validate the youths' experiences and existences by listening to their stories. I am really excited about the focus group discussions and have been practicing my Spanish to make sure that I am able to communicate effectively during my stay. I also expect the youth to help me "learn the lingo of the street" to express common experiences such as hunger and drug usage. These key terms will be essential to recognize while working with the youth and better help me express my empathy and support.

Stay tuned for my first in-country update!



*For the purposes of confidentiality, all of the names in the blog are abbreviated and the names of some locations have changed.*



## “Guatemala City: Day 1”

I left Baltimore for Washington National airport at 5 AM to catch my 8:30 AM flight to Houston. Upon boarding, the crew announced a recently found, though somehow otherwise overlooked, fuel leak in the plane. Twelve hours later, I arrived in Houston, not so happy that I woke up at 4 AM to barely make it to the Gulf. After receiving meal voucher after meal voucher, complimentary toiletry kit, and a “Free night at the Marriott” pass, I was exhausted and wondering if I was ever going to make it to Guatemala. Nonetheless, I awoke the next morning and was feeling good about the day—finally I would make it to Guatemala! The flight was short, and we were given eggs with Chalula sauce (my favorite) for breakfast. Flying into the city was pretty spectacular. We flew over hundreds of miles of foothills and ravines, over blue lakes and active volcanoes. The city itself is huge; Guatemala City is the largest urban agglomeration in Central America and as I would quickly find out, one of the most polluted cities in the world (but not before finding out that I am VERY tall, at least by Guatemalan standards). While walking through the Guatemala City airport on my way to customs, I felt like I had to duck the entire time, and it was a strain to bend over so far as to pick up the proper forms at the customs counter. I am a giant in this country.



My supervisor and I were picked up by C, my host father, and two of his employees AR and EZ. AR and EZ seemed to be experts in navigating around some of the most ridiculous rush-hour traffic I have ever experienced, or what is known to Guatemalans as “la hora pico” or “la hora de bomper a bomper.” Our escort cars were little speedy roadsters that belched out thick black fumes, donned tinted windows, and had no seatbelts, but plenty of Reggaeton. No need for signals here—all you need to do is lay on the horn and stick your hand out the window hoping that a pedestrian, moto, or autobus isn't in your way. I wasn't at all worried, though, because while I would not last 2 minutes driving in this city, where road lines are non-existent and potholes 6-feet wide are studded along the highway, I knew that AR and EZ were pros at this in their own right and I anticipated a fun and speedy adventure.

After exchanging money, we sped off to a traditional Guatemalan restaurant where we had lunch. I chose the carnitas, which ended up being small pork cubes in some type of marinade. I ordered a

horchata and some coffee, which in Guatemala seems to accompany every meal along with heaps of sugar. I don't take sugar and I am sure that the Guatemalans at the table took plenty for everyone. The meal was filling and relatively cheap and came with a variety of pre-lunch spreads such as macaroni salad, beets, salsa, carrots, and radish.

After lunch, we went directly to the hogar, which is the term used for the homeless youth shelter that Nuestros Derechos provides. The shelter was a two-story concrete cutout, with each room painted a different color. Downstairs there are three bedrooms with bunkbeds and lockers and one common room with couches. The hogar has an open-air atrium in the middle with sinks. Two fire-escape style stairways lead up to the second floor where there is a kitchen, a computer room, and a meeting room. You can also get to the roof from the second floor. At the hogar I met some of the youth who are being supported by Nuestros Derechos' services, with ages ranging from one to late teens. One of the girls I met was pregnant and another had two children who were at other shelters. I also had the opportunity to meet with JO who will help me co-facilitate the focus groups and be my guide into stepping into the youth culture at the hogar. He was very kind and informative and part of the meeting that we had to go over the logistics of the focus groups, even including what kind of pizza we should provide for incentive to participate in the group discussions.

After the hogar, we went back to C's house and I had the opportunity to meet my new family! I have a host madre, two siblings, and a cousin who I am living with during my stay. I also have a host dog, Jingo, who is a boxer. This is especially great for me because I have two boxers at home, so the coincidence was well received. He is a little afraid of me at this point, but his madre assures me that he is “muy noble” and so I am sure he will come around. He lives on the roof of the house and scopes out the scene, looking for intruders as any good dog would. Breakfast-for-dinner was great. We ate black beans puree, fried eggs, fresh bread, and coffee. As I kid, I would beg for breakfast for dinner, so the fact that it was the norm to have breakfast for dinner in Guatemala was very exciting. The family was so welcoming, and I was excited to find out that my host mother is a social worker in a hospital. I plan on asking lots of questions on what it is like to be a social worker in an international community. Before bed, my host mother gave me a small gift for “International Women's Day,” which I had never heard of before but was very grateful to become aware of. Do Americans celebrate this? After very long day, I finally retired to sleep in my new room, knowing that when I wake, the real action would begin.

## “Guatemala City: Day 2”

I woke up at 6 AM to leave the house by 7. Breakfast was "pan integral" which is a sweet multi-grain bread, papaya, cantaloupe and coffee. C and I went to pick up one of his colleagues who work in the youth detention centers in the city, and two YAP employees so we could attend a 9 AM "reunion" (meeting) with a international NGO representative.

The meeting was about an hour-and-a-half, with the theme of how to integrate the NGO's services with Nuestros Derechos and YAP. A lot of the time was spent on the challenges of working in Guatemala and frustrations on approaches that have not yet worked and need to be changed. I understood most of the meeting, though many of the details were lost, as the communication was fast and serious and my Spanish has a lot of room for improvement. I learned a lot, though, and absorbed information on how international NGO meetings can occur, and I did speak up once, to talk about the focus group studies.

After the meeting, we were able to go to the mall for a little bit. Because of the way the zonas are spread out, we had to linger around the area and walk to our next destination. Here I was able to get a chip for my Guatemalan cell phone, some pants to sleep in (which I forgot in the States), and use a nice bathroom. Immediately I noticed the ethnic and economic disparities between the folks at the mall, and the rest of the population in the streets of the city. The people in the mall seemed very well-off, and most were fair-skinned Guatemalans who were of a completely different social class than the majority of Guatemalans I had come into contact with. We were within walking distance to the restaurant where our next meeting would be, a white tablecloth, "fine-dining" Mediterranean eatery. The food was excellent and filling. I knew that Guatemalans tend to make lunch their biggest meal of the day, but having 5 courses for lunch seemed outrageous! Appetizers, soup, entree, dessert and coffee, all at around 1 PM was definitely a first for me, but the experience was so enjoyable, I began wondering why Americans don't take 3-hour lunch breaks. The comfort of the outdoor patio where we ate and delicious food was in stark contrast to the harshness of the discussion that accompanied the meal.

I was looking forward to this meeting because we would be chatting with three Guatemalans who work in detention centers with youth, including a psychologist and a social worker. Their insight into how the youth detention centers operate and the dangers to both staff and youth were very hard-hitting and much appreciated to hear. One of the workers told a story (which I didn't catch at the time, but was later told by my supervisor) that illustrates the dangers of advocating for youth rights within the context of the detention centers in the city. The story told was of an event last year when gang members in a youth detention center in Guatemala City took 5 staff members (including a teacher) hostage within the center. Gang members demanded that their gang leaders be transferred to that detention center from another detention center or hostages would be killed. When the gang member's demands were denied, the teacher being held hostage was decapitated. Next, his heart was cut out and eaten by gang members for the sake of initial ritual for a new "marero." The story captures how dangerous it is to be a social worker, psychologist, or other social services advocate in youth detention center settings in Guatemala City. Advocating for youth rights in the United States is difficult; however, the dangers that these brave workers face daily cannot compare to sometimes forgotten ease of the American system.

By this point in the day, I was exhausted, and happy to leave the rest of the day's meetings to the YAP staff accompanying me in Guatemala. However, I needed to make it to an Internet source so I could send word to my family and friends that I made it Guatemala safely. EZ, who I was quickly finding out would be my escort and day-to-day [contact], was able to take me to a place where I could get web access; however, after we got back into his car it wouldn't start. I could tell that EZ was getting very frustrated, and so I asked politely if I could try to get the car to start. Sure enough, I was quite the mechanic and was able to get the car to work on my first try. In an embarrassed and joking form of gratitude, EZ replied, "See, women are good for things!" Since then, EZ has been the go-to guy, always around to give a ride. I wonder if he is trying to be of help, or if he follows me in case he wants me to fix his car.

## “La Vida del Basurero: Garbage Dump Life”

Two days ago I went to Zona 3, a city district known for its "basureros" or garbage dumps. When we think of garbage dumps, we normally consider the picture to be a semi-regulated area with restricted access where people bring their trash to get sorted. In Guatemala City, one of the most polluted cities in the world where recycling isn't even an afterthought, garbage dumps are brought to a whole new level.

Miles and miles of barren wasteland spread out across the city center where strong winds whip through the ravine, pelleting dust and debris against anyone who was brave enough to venture through. The sun is hot and the stench unbearable, but for thousands of Guatemalans, this environment is home and the source of their livelihood.

Around the trash dumps, homeless Guatemalans, most of whom are under the age of 20 and have several children, have constructed a maze of tin and concrete huts. These basurero communities characterize the poverty of the Guatemalan street youth who risk their lives every day to sort through the endless piles of bacteria-ridden trash to find items to sell to subsist in a city with a nearly non-existent social welfare system. Last year alone, over 200 youth were accidentally killed in the basureros, many of whom were babies who were run over by garbage trucks because they left unattended while their mothers gathered trash.



Also last year, a methane-fueled fire killed over twenty people who were unable to escape the flames which overpowered the heaps of waste. A chaotic scene of birds and dogs, pitted

against one another for food, only adds to the desolate atmosphere where barefoot teenagers play soccer in the midst of anyone else's nightmare and men fight one another for first dibs to access to the yellow trucks which transport the garbage in. In fact, a hierarchy of seniority even exists as to who gets access to the best garbage first. Many over-eager Guatemalans who know which trucks bring in the best trash, get run over by rushing the trucks too quickly; other times avalanches of waste cover bodies, most of which are never found.





## “Las Drogas Guatemaltecas de la Calle: Guatemalan Street Drugs”

Many Guatemalan street youth are addicted to drugs. The drugs allow an escape from the harsh realities that these youths face every day: not knowing where to sleep, where their next meal will come from and when, harassment by the police, detainment and death.

Because the youth are without, designer drugs and expensive and well-known substances such as heroin, cocaine, or marijuana are a non-option. The youth will abuse what they can and, sadly, these drugs are the most habit-forming and lethal drugs out there.

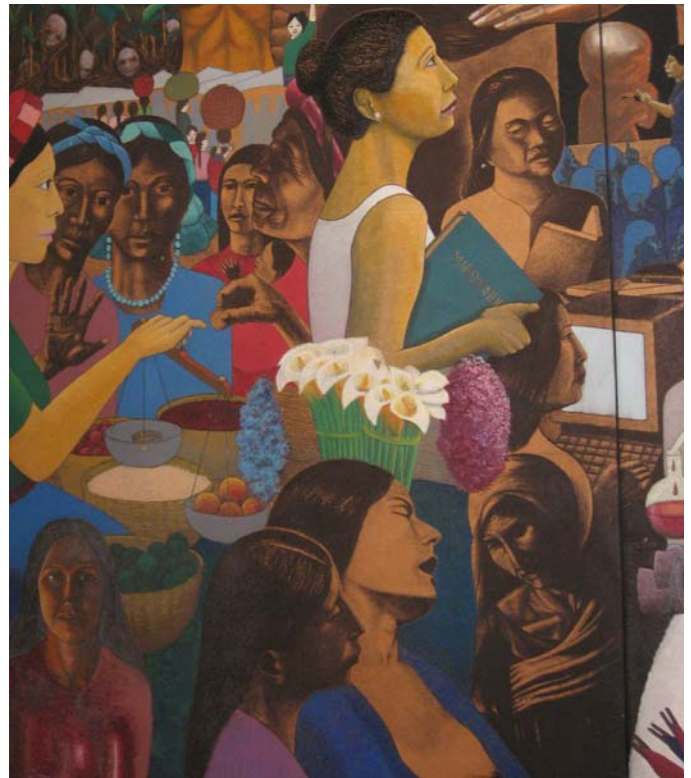


I had a run-in with a well-known street drug at the Hogar (shelter) the other day and I didn't even realize that a drug transaction was occurring at the time. The youth were exchanging a plastic bag full of flowers and I thought that the gesture was innocent. It turns out that the exchange was a bag of florifundia, a type of native Guatemalan

flower that the youth boil with water to form a hallucinogenic tea. The drug is extremely powerful and potent and highly abused because of its availability; the flowers grow all over the countryside and are free to pick. Many youth drink the tea for the first time not knowing the horrendous side effects which include periods of violence, temporary insanity, and auditory, tactile and visual hallucinations. Physical side-effects include dilated pupils, increased pulse and breathing rate, and dry mucous membranes of the nose, mouth and throat. It is also common for the poison to cause vomiting, convulsions, coma and death. Onset occurs within the first 15-30 minutes after consumption and symptoms last up to 72 hours. The lethal dose is about 100 mg and usually a moderate dose is considered one flower, but a high dose would be two to three.

The youth are not only using this campesino type drug, but also huffing solvents, usually shoe glues. It is estimated that 40 million street children in Latin America use shoe glues to get high, often as young as 5 and 6 years old in efforts to suppress feelings of hunger, cold, and abandonment. Usage can cause irreversible brain damage in young street children. Many organizations have called for stricter legislation on the marketing and sales of glues in Latin America due to the high usage of street children. Companies such as H.B. Fuller, a Fortune 500 company who makes 27% of its profits in Latin America by selling highly addictive glues to areas where street children are the targeted market, are facing litigation for the death of street children who have died inhaling glues such as Resistol. The street children who use the glues are called "resistoleros" and the problem is a chief concern for places like the Hogar who want to protect the street youth and promote sobriety and safety.

Social services providers who work with street youth need to be keenly aware of these types of drugs and their side effects. The director of Nuestros Derechos said that while it is easy to tell if a youth is high on marijuana or drunk, it is sometimes less difficult to tell if they are high on glue or florifundia, making the penal process more difficult. An investigation of the youth who brought the florifundia into the Hogar is pending.



## “The City of Children”

I recently visited "La Ciudad de los Niños" or the City of Children. The fortified institution is situated outside of the city and access is limited. I received a "volunteer pass" and was able to tour the location which serves as a place for homeless youths to receive care in a multitude of areas.

The institution receives youths whose ages range from a couple months to 18 years. Currently 280 youth are living in this compound-like environment surrounded by cement walls and barbed wires. Many of the youth were abandoned, obtained through an intervention in which a parent was trying to sell the child, or transferred from other institutions within Guatemala City. The institution itself was aesthetically pleasing, though it is unsure what type of accountability exists within the institution. Also, the director confessed that there is a definite lack of staff and training, two qualities of the place that I definitely was able to observe. While the location is not at capacity, there exists the need for more caregivers, especially within the infant and special needs populations; currently the ratio of caregiver to infant is 1:12.

I also sat in on a meeting with a man, RO, who is helping Nuestros Derechos film a public service announcement to air in the United States in an effort to raise funds to support the program. The documentarian was a very charismatic, warm, and intelligent Salvadoran who has filmed several major Latin American social movements and events. The meeting was a brainstorming session on ways to create a short and sincere message that can effectively target Americans who would like to give to the cause. We also discussed where the PSA should air and what types of resources are available to make the PSA possible, such as filming equipment, and what type of imagery we will show in the PSA. One well-liked idea was the showing of a street youth who can testify to the benefits of Nuestros Derechos. The themes of opportunity and hope would characterize the PSA.



## “Little Rays of Sunshine”

I visited "La Escuela de los Rayitos del Sol" or the School of Little Rays of Sunshine. The school is situated on the side of a mountain, high in the Zona 18 District of the city. It appears that if the wind blew too strongly, the whole town would slide into the ravine. Zona 18 is what we in the United States refer to as "underserved" and "marginalized" and would consider all the children "at-risk."



The school is primarily supported by Nuestros Derechos. It is one of two schools that Nuestros Derechos supports that provide education to "ninos obreros." Ninos obreros (working children) are children who are denied access to the Guatemalan public school system because they must contribute to the family economically. Since they are working (often selling sweets or small items to tourists and locals alike), they cannot attend school. Nuestros Derechos offers an alternative. "La Escuela de los Rayitos del Sol" accommodates the economic reality of these children's lives and provides an alternative schedule of classes so that the children meet their familial obligation and receive an education.

The Zona 18 community supports "La Escuela de los Rayitos del Sol." Local gangs extort money from local businesses and even schools, but "La Escuela de los Rayitos del Sol" is given immunity. The school, which is supervised and



maintained by the community of Zona 18, serves 48 youths. The Guatemalan government does not officially recognize "La Escuela de los Rayitos," but some headway is being made in working towards that goal which would bring potential new resources to the school. For now, the walls are made of tin and cement with dirt floors. The school is without water or electricity. The youth were not even in session when I visited. A small child, who we found near the school, was able to get a key from the school's leader who lives across the street to let us into the desolate three-room shack. There were no books, no pencils, no chalkboards. Only broken chairs and a couple makeshift notebooks with a few desks circa 1970 were scattered throughout. The school was in definite need of improvement. I cannot imagine how hard it would be for anyone to be able to learn there.

## “My First Focus Group”

Today I ran the first focus-group. I didn't really know what to expect, how the group was going to go, or if I was going to be well-received. By now, I have spent time getting to know those in the Hogar (shelter) and forming bonds with JO, the Hogar director, so I had reason to believe it would go pretty smoothly. I was all set with my questions, tape recorder and little incentives for participation in the discussion groups when I arrived at the shelter. The group consisted of five men in their early twenties, who had been living on the streets until they found the Hogar. The discussion location was a nearby park where we could be outside, away from the city noise and pollution, and then play a game of futbol (soccer) afterwards.

Some of the repeated themes that came up in the discussion included: the need for work, the desire to help their family and regain contact with them, the sentiment of family within the Hogar, the lack of support of the government, the hardships of finding food, lack of self-esteem and worth of the individuals, the hardships of drug and alcohol abuse, and the desires to better their situations. All of the young men were thoughtful and ready to share. Each group member was honest and genuine, and you could really tell that these were folks who would do anything in their power to help themselves and help those around them if given the opportunity.

The questions that I used to prompt the discussion included:

- Who helps you and how?
- What needs to change in your community?
- What is your best characteristic?
- How can the Nuestros Derechos Program help you more?
- Describe to me a goal or dream for your future.
- What are three things that you need today?
- What services within the community do you use?
- Describe to me a typical day in the life when you were on the streets and now that you are in the Hogar.
- Who hears you and to whom do you tell your problems?
- What do you need from your government?
- How can you help your family?

After the focus group, we played some soccer, and I must say, I think I impressed the group. Having not played in a couple years, it seems that my skills came back to me once we hit the concrete and I was a huge asset to our little 4 v. 4 competition. The game was a great bonding experience and the rules of culture and language need not apply on the pavement. We had a blast. The final exchange was some hemp jewelry that I made for the youth which I was glad to give to the guys as small parting gifts, thanking them for their participation and trust. I told them that even if they didn't like the bracelets (as some of them were in my opinion quite girly) they could at least give them to a chica they knew or to a family member. However, without hesitation, the young men fought over who received which bracelet and quickly tied them around their wrists and necks. I was so happy to see some of my art worn proudly on these young men. Hemp jewelry never looked so good!





## “Living a ‘Shelter’ Life”

This morning I arrived at the Hogar (Shelter) around 9 AM. Many of the girls were in a room upstairs learning how to do hair. This was the morning's group activity as many of the young girls aspire to be beauticians. Breakfast was a communal pot of Ramen noodles which sat in the corner on the floor. A scraggly rabbit hops around feet as girls crowd around, MA, the girl getting her hair done.

Another girl, CO, who is 8 months pregnant, sits on the floor as she writes in her journal the recipe for making hair gel that the instructor of the course had taught them. MA is 20 years old and has two children who are also in the room; one is 2 years and the other is 3 months. I feed the 3-month old her bottle. She has a cough and needs medicine. She is undernourished. The girl practicing hairdos is ER. She doesn't trust me and often times greets me with jokes and hostility. She asks if she could do my hair. I laughed and told her not a chance, to which she scowled and tugged at MA's head as she let out a shriek of pain.

After I had enough of watching beauty parlor, I went with AL and CR, two street outreach workers to find MI, a 14-year-old girl who had recently fled the Hogar. She is pregnant and addicted to huffing (sniffing glue) and crack, habits she supports by prostitution. AL and CR had a tip that she was staying somewhere nearby. Our mission: to go around the streets of Guatemala City looking for MI to bring her back to the Hogar. AL jokes that I am not a good social worker if I don't convince this girl to get back to the Hogar. So, the search begins. We wind the dirty, dusty streets, evading angry drivers, knocking on doors, entering tiendas (shops), visiting parks where drug addicts frequent. Along the way, AL tells me stories of different youth who stay in the Hogar and their multitudes of problems. She tells me about one young man who refused to tell his sexual partners that he was HIV+ before having unprotected sex with them. He maintained the attitude that he is going to die and he wants others to die with him. We never find the girl we are looking for. But we put the word out that Nuestros Derechos staff is looking for her and extending a reminder that the Hogar is a safe place for her to return to.

The mood of our walk is only lightened when I suggest we stop for some juice. I buy a coco and AL and CR enjoy shaved ice with syrup. We return to the Hogar at lunch time. Lunch is served at a federal food kitchen which is only a five-minute walk away. The only problem is that you have to cross multiple lane highways to get there. Without the aid of crosswalks or an overhead walkway. I immediately shook my head "no, absolutely not" in a "you're kidding me right?" kind of way. AL laughs and says, "This is fun!" She grabs my hand, and runs me through 60+ MPH traffic, stopping and starting across lane after lane. I look back to see one of the young boys holding the 3-month old baby under his shirt as he darts across traffic. We finally make it to the lunch hall. The cafeteria is clean and you can get a plate of food for 3 Quetzales, which is less than 50 American cents. There are only four in the city, and hours are limited, and lines are long. I feed the two-year-old her food which consists of rice, beans, tortilla, and a banana slopped on a metal tray. I somehow feel responsible for this little one. I hope they hold her tightly when they run across the highways.



## “Doing So Much With So Little”

Today I ran the second focus group, this time with the young women of the group. ER and one other girl who still remains suspect of me chose not to participate. The sample size was four young women, all teenagers, who live in the Hogar (Shelter). Three of them have children, and two are pregnant. AL was the co-moderator for this group. We sat under a playground at a nearby park to chat. The same questions that were used during the men's group were used for the women's.



The most common themes were: the need for material things in the Hogar like towels, baby formula, shampoo, and soap. They also voiced the concern that there is not enough food and they would like to have classes available in the Hogar. All of young women expressed the concern to get good jobs one day to provide a better

life for their babies and young children. They want to learn how to read and write and want books and notebooks for the Hogar. One girl asked if it was possible for her to learn to type. They want more education on sexual health and they want more people to confide in within the shelter. The girl who is 8-months pregnant said that her best friend recently left the Hogar and she is currently looking for someone to confide in. When I asked the teens what their best characteristic was, they all replied, "My children" or "I am a good mother." The biggest change they want to see in their community is for it to be safe.

I can attest to the lack of safety in the city and to the lack of resources in the shelter. The Hogar has great workers, many who once lived on the streets themselves and now do the street outreach work that saved them. But supplies are scarce. The Nuestros Derechos vehicle I traveled in for most of my stay had a non-functioning gas gauge. Some guesses at how much fuel was in the tank were better than others. On the day of the focus group, estimates were off. On the way back to my host family's home after running this focus group, the car I was in broke down on the highway because it was out of gas. EZ, the driver, took an empty jug from the trunk and began walking to a nearby gas station. Within minutes, he called me and the Nuestros Derechos staff member in the car with me from a public phone saying that crack addicts robbed him at gunpoint, taking everything he had. At this point, I wasn't sure if he had purchased the gas, where he or the robbers were (or where we were, for that matter). All I knew is that cars were whizzing by us, we were broken down in this car and had just pooled our last Quetzales for gas. Locking doors, keeping an eye out, and glad to not be alone in the car, I couldn't help wondering if he would return and in what condition. Alas, EZ finally arrived, gas in hand, shaking from nerves. He quietly filled up the tank, drove me the remainder of the way home, only saying that he was glad he got to keep his shoes as crack addicts are known to leave victims barefoot. What surprised me the most was that this incident was seen as a pretty routine risk in daily life in the capital and that having shoes was about as bright of an outcome as could be expected. Brave-hearted workers are Nuestros Derechos greatest asset, but how much can they do with so few resources?



# Notes from New Jersey

## “Who Am I?”

Hi, my name is Bree. I'm a Senior Graduate Student at Monmouth University in New Jersey. My program is International and Community Development in Social Work. I have been interning with Youth Advocate Program, Inc. (YAP) since September, 2009.

Through YAP, I have been given a great opportunity to experience different cultural beliefs about youth and varying degrees of action in response to the at-risk youth population. Through YAP's sister agencies in Sierra Leone, Guatemala, and Ireland, I have been given a wonderful opportunity to really take a look at the problems facing youth today in various settings in the world. I am proud to say that over the next few months I will have a chance to observe youth in the local vicinity and engage them in a focus group to hear their thoughts on the problems facing youth today, as well as what they would like to see happen as a resolution to those problems. I am excited for this journey and can't wait to delve into this project. I hope you'll join me on my journey by engaging in my blog.

Thank you all for your support,

Bree



## “Common Ground Between New Jersey and Minnesota”

As a native of suburban Minnesota, I am very unfamiliar with city life. Newark is somewhat close to what I expected it to be, mind you I had a lot of people telling me what to expect. I suppose I had a more negative impression of what Newark would be, as most people were warning me to be careful and giving me statistics about the high crime rates and levels of gang violence. I will admit that seeing all the graffiti on the walls of anything and everything along my journey to the YAP office did deter me a bit from wanting to be there. However, I also believe that appearances can be quite deceiving, and to really get a feel for a new place it is necessary to spend a lot of quality time there.

My adventure started with problematic parking. It took 40 minutes to find a parking space that was nearly a mile away from the YAP office! It wouldn't have bothered me if I had my trusty tennis shoes, but this was a rare occasion where I chose heels. I realized later that if I were a smart woman, I would have brought my heels and wore my tennis shoes to walk! Lesson learned. I must have looked like a lunatic walking the streets of Newark. Armed with my trusty pepper spray (I couldn't leave without it seeing as I was warned by several people to beware of the mean streets of the city), I walked the streets staring at a gadget that was indeed speaking to me! I brought my handheld GPS in order to find the YAP building from where I parked and found myself staring at it intently, and even talking back to it as it spoke to me! Yes, I did have this realization after several funny looks on the street, which just reminds me never to walk with a GPS in an unfamiliar city again. I must have looked crazier than anyone who would look outright dangerous! I mean, who talks to a handheld device that does not have another actual person on the other end of it? Another lesson learned.

All of this pales in comparison to everything I learned at the Newark YAP office. I was not disappointed in my expectations for learning from YAP that day. Everyone at the office was so generously informative and kind. I was able to meet much of the staff and they were patient with me as I learned about their local programs. Being that I have only worked with our international sister agencies since interning with YAP, this was a completely new experience for me.



I met with several of the In-Home Behavioral Therapists, administrative staff, and a couple of the advocates. Melanie, the Regional Director, was kind enough to not only allow me to ask her questions, but to allow me to sit in on their staff meeting. I was able to gather so much information about how the local program works, but I also was able to gain perspectives from people who hold various positions in the agency. I feel that I have a fairly good understanding of how YAP in Essex County functions and I feel that my level of understanding is only due to the hospitality the staff showed me. I am truly grateful for this experience.



The best part of my day was when I got to meet a program participant. He was an amazing young man. He was so open and honest about his situation and had no problem meeting with me

to tell me all about it. He honestly looked like he was going to cry when he told me, "I can honestly say that without YAP, I would be in prison or I'd be dead right now." It was so direct. This comment took me by surprise. It was not the fact that YAP made a difference in his life, but rather the extent to which it made a difference. He was so grateful and appreciative of the support YAP has given him. It really touched my heart.

There was also a male advocate I spoke with who explained to me why his job was so rewarding. He said that it is the best feeling when you are able to be a support for a youth who doesn't have anything -- when you can take a youth out to a movie or to dinner and teach them how to socialize and have manners. Many of these youth don't have these simple opportunities to learn basic life skills. Not only do they get a lesson in something they can utilize often in life, but they also get a special reward. It isn't often, sometimes never, that these youth have the chance to go to a movie at a theater or even eat at a restaurant that is not fast-food. It really touched my heart knowing that they love their jobs so much, that it brings joy just taking a youth out to dinner or even just roller skating at the local park. I'm sure it means even more to the youth who receive YAP's services.

On my hour-long drive home, I had plenty of time to think. Newark isn't that different from Minneapolis, the major city in Minnesota. Minneapolis has a high (and rising) level of gang association and violence. It has a much higher crime rate than the surrounding areas, probably than any other city in Minnesota. It is one of the more impoverished areas of Minnesota. I feel that the two correlate quite well. However, Newark has something Minneapolis does not: YAP. I have seen how YAP helps its youth, what a difference they make in the community, and how they work together as a team. No, not really a team: A family. The staff at the Essex County YAP office is a family. You can see it in their dedication and their relationships with one another. They are bonded. They work well in the community by working well together in the office. Maybe soon it should be considered that a program like this be developed in Minneapolis. I know that it would only benefit the community.

Soon I get to visit the Camden office of YAP. I am looking forward to meeting the staff there and having an opportunity to see how YAP works in other areas. I am positive that it will be another grand experience and I honestly can't wait to see Camden. I am trying to go into it with no expectations, but if we're honest with ourselves we will realize that no matter what we do, we will have expectations. I hope you will all continue on this journey with me to see what Camden is really like and how the staff make a difference. I know this internship has proven to be extremely beneficial to me in so many ways. I can't wait to move to the next step!

## “What Camden Is (and Isn’t)”

Camden is impoverished. Camden houses many, many gang members. Camden has a high homeless population. Camden is dangerous. Camden is dirty. Camden is...

Not what I thought it would be. These are all things people told me to expect before coming to Camden. They are all what other people's impressions of Camden are based on what they've heard through various media sources and maybe, just maybe on their own impressions. In situations like these, it is extremely important to not pass judgment and to experience the area for oneself. If you go into a new place with all of the judgments that other people have, you cannot adequately judge your experience and your surroundings yourself. I have learned this many times over, but I will share with you that it is the best lesson learned.

Yes, Camden has ranked #1 as the most dangerous city to live in more than once. Yes, areas of Camden are impoverished and can be dangerous. Yes, Camden does have a higher gang population than many other places. However, I am a firm believer that people navigate toward the negative aspects of things automatically, rather than even wanting to give it a chance. My first impression of Camden upon driving into the city was split by two different aspects: 1) In part, it seems quaint. There were cute older churches and a beautiful clock on a lamp-post like stand; 2) It seemed like any other city. It had some old, dilapidated buildings, but it also had newer structures. Not once did I feel a twinge of fear nor did I ever feel unsafe. Of course, I didn't walk as far in this city as I did in Newark. It also isn't as busy an area as where the YAP office was located in Newark.

Once again, the people of YAP were friendly and helpful. They were so informative and willing to help me. I was amazed by their hospitality. I'm beginning to think that unless you have this kind of openness and amazing talent for making people feel comfortable and right at home, you are unable to work for YAP. It certainly wouldn't be a bad thing, but it is quite amazing to me how wonderful all the staff I've met have been. I felt welcome immediately. Everyone was in an upbeat and friendly mood. My day hadn't started off that well, but the second I walked through the door my mood improved.

The staff were very helpful in teaching me about the program, but even more helpful in teaching me about Camden. There are so many stereotypes that we hold. We may not always know that we have these stereotypes, but when we become aware of them it can be shocking. For instance, I realized today that I am fairly frightened of a young man (black, white, or purple) wearing a sideways baseball cap, extremely baggy jeans, and gold chains. I used this as an example when talking about stereotypes and judgments with one of the staff members. It shocked me when I realized what I was saying. To a point, there is a need to be cautious, but am I overstepping that line with my thoughts and actions? As a cop's daughter, I've learned a thing or two about safety and not putting yourself in any kind of dangerous situations. I am always alert to my surroundings, recently realizing that I am so keen on my environment that I can tell you how many people are around me, if they are male or female, and if they feel dangerous all without even looking directly at them. I typically carry pepper spray with me, for if my dad found out I didn't, I'd be toast! I always have my hand on my cell phone, in case it should be needed. These are things I do every day no matter who is around. However, when I see someone fitting the above description, my hand is clasped over the pepper spray with the nozzle opened, my other hand is gripping my cell phone ready to dial, and I am watching that person very carefully. The whole time I'm thinking, "Am I going to be jumped by this person wanting any amount of money he can get, even though I never have any? Will he keep walking past me? Will I be safe? How much farther until I'm in a building or my car?"

As I reflect on this now, I realize that these judgments hold true for everyone in some way or another. You hear about Camden and instantly a judgment pops to mind. You hear about Martha's Vineyard and an entirely different judgment comes to mind. You hear about a former gang member trying to be a productive member of society. What pops in your mind? My point is that we all have judgments. The most rewarding experience is when you can recognize those judgments, put them aside, and just live the experience in the moment. Don't think about what you thought before you got here. Don't think about what others tell you. Don't think about what you've heard through the media. Just live it. Just allow yourself to experience it and just maybe those judgments will give way to something spectacular.

I can't say much about Camden as a city for as little as I saw of it, but I can say that I did not feel unsafe. I can say that my experience wasn't tainted by those who only gave me negative information. I was fortunate enough to sit down with a staff member who recounted to me her life in Camden. She grew up here and she has overcome what people base their harshest judgments upon: The stereotypes of the people who live here. She has a son involved in so many activities, I lost track when she was telling me about them! She knows the area she lives in, but she also knows how to thrive. She told me that where she lives will not define who she is or who her son becomes. That is inspirational!



The people of Camden, NJ face many of the same problems as people of other cities. Gang violence, teen pregnancy, low-level of education, mental illness, unemployment, poverty, homelessness, substance abuse, crime, etc... The programs here are the same as those in Essex County, NJ so I won't bore you by going over the same things. I suppose this blog is more about gaining an understanding of the area in which I will be working. I wanted to understand the issues these youth face and what their environment is like. It made me keenly aware of my judgments as I was learning these things and I feel that it is as important to examine myself and my judgments as it is to learn about these youth.

I feel prepared to begin these focus groups now. I feel as though I have enough background on the area and the issues they face that we can have a real discussion. I want to have a deep understanding of what life is like for these youth and what they think about their lives. I want to hear their perspectives and ideas. I can't wait to get a chance to speak with them and I just know I will learn some important things from them if they are willing to teach me.

## “How I Found Myself Within a Group”

After my day spent speaking with staff at Camden, I was invited to participate in a Life Skills group that meets in the evening. This group helps to teach youth basic living skills such as filling out job applications, the steps required to rent an apartment, how to do your laundry, etc... Tonight's topic was a part of a series on Job Management. This particular group was focused on discussing what can get you fired from a job. I felt very out of place in this group. I was one of two Caucasian women, the other of whom was a mother of some of the participants. There were four African-American and one Hispanic participant(s). I partly felt out of place because of race, but that wasn't really something I thought about at the time. Mostly, I felt out of place, because I realized throughout the group that I don't understand these youth.

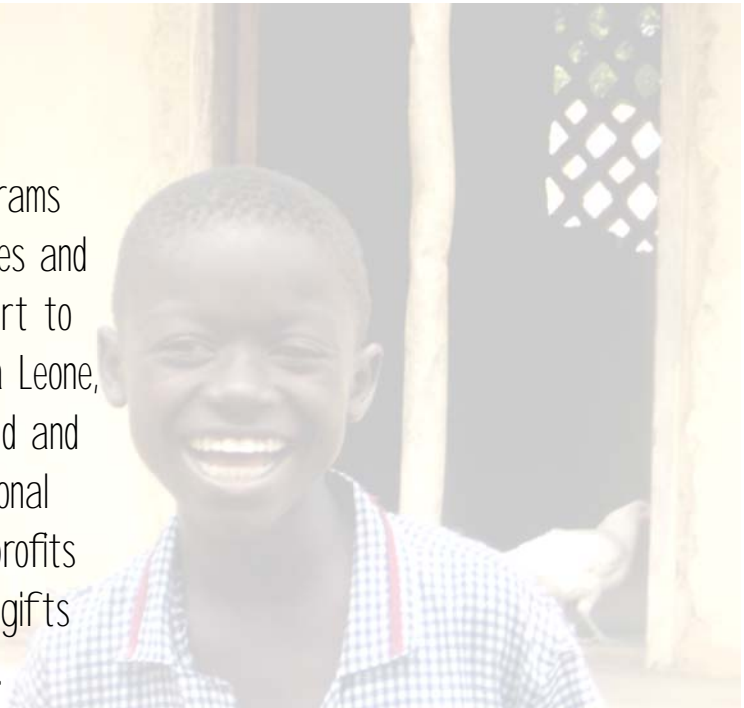
I realized I'm going to really have to work hard in my focus groups in understanding the youth and controlling the group. These youth speak so differently from me that at times I found myself wondering what it was they were really trying to convey. I wasn't at all sure I understood what they wanted to say much of the time, until I heard the group leader and the mother basically paraphrasing the content the youth brought to the discussion. I also noticed that it seems these youth feel they have to yell over everyone to be heard and are constantly shouting at one another. The dynamics of this group are unlike anything I've seen or experienced before. The one aspect of the group that I found difficult to understand was how hard it was to actually facilitate a group. These youth goof around a lot and don't really take the group seriously. I understand that part of it, but it seemed so difficult to keep them on task and focused. They got off track easily and went in so many different directions that it seemed impossible to get through one question from the group before moving on.

I think I'm just going to have to work extra hard in understanding their culture. I'm also going to have to make sure that if I don't understand something, I will have to ask the youth to clarify. To recognize there are going to be roadblocks is important and beneficial. If I anticipate roadblocks, I can have responses ready in order to clarify and maybe put the participants and myself on a similar level. My lack of understanding of a subject in their world may make me seem more real and imperfect to them. To share those commonalities help level the playing field so hopefully they can feel they can be more open. It will be a challenge, but it's a challenge I'm looking forward to facing!



## ABOUT YAP, INC.

YAP currently operates 125 programs serving 75 counties across 17 states and Washington, DC. We provide support to sister agencies in Guatemala, Sierra Leone, Belfast, Northern Ireland, Scotland and Hawaii. Funding for our international programs comes from other non-profits and private donations, as well as gifts and weekly payroll deductions.



## ABOUT SOCIAL WORK AT MONMOUTH UNIVERSITY

Monmouth University is a private, full-spectrum University whose School of Social Work prepares its graduates for professional practice with a commitment to advancing human rights by implementing social and economic justice. Monmouth is located in West Long Branch, NJ. To learn more go to [monmouth.edu/socialwork](http://monmouth.edu/socialwork).





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