



In this newsletter, we continue the reflections from members of the group that visited Honduras last March.



Debbie Armstrong

Exploits Valley YMCA



Debbie Armstrong (on left) and Bev Brace outside the YMCA building in Taulabe, Honduras.

For me, the trip to Honduras was all about the people we met. From the YMCA staff to our bus drivers to the volunteers and the participants in the programs we visited—they all left a great impression on me.

I was prepared somewhat for what I would see in Honduras. I was expecting poverty and littered environments and I saw a lot of that. I was expecting beautiful landscapes which didn't disappoint. The majestic mountains and valleys as well as the small town squares were as I imagined. I was expecting beautiful looking children and exotic looking people and I saw them as well. What I wasn't expecting was the warmth and generosity that I felt wherever we went. The people were just fabulous!

First there was the YMCA staff, a small but committed group led by Rosibel Martínez, a woman who is very passionate about her country and the potential of its youth. She has a vision for the YMCA and is working hard with her staff to realize that vision. She was a wonderful host who went out of her way to make this trip a great success.

But the highlight of the trip for me was meeting all the leaders and young people who participate in the YMCA programs. I was so proud that the dollars we raise at home can have such a positive impact on these people.

The leaders and volunteers were so passionate about their work, so excited to share with us and highlight their successes. They work long hours without much support to meet the needs of youth in Honduras. I felt privileged to be in their company knowing how they live their commitment and strive to always do better. To see where they travel, sometimes on foot, for many kilometers to work with young people in isolated communities was an inspiration to me.

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Which brings me to the youth of Honduras, the main reason why we are involved in this partnership. From the more confident to the shyer, they were all amazing. Their bright eyes and beautiful smiles, their love of the YMCA programs and the gratitude they expressed to us will always stay with me.

They were always so mannerly, wanting to impress yet wondering just who we were. I so wished I could speak Spanish because I wanted hear more of their stories. We were fortunate to have some of their stories translated but I longed for more.

I can say sincerely that I was impressed with the work the ACJ is doing. I am also truly grateful for the opportunity to see the programs up close and realize the positive impact that they are having on so many people in this country.

So for me the most significant learning was how a group of people in a developing country can so embody and put into action the core values of the YMCA. How they can take a few resources and do so much. The kindness of the Honduran people will stay with me forever •

 **Heather Hastings**
Moncton YMCA



Heather in Honduras

What comes to my mind first and foremost when I recall my recent visit to Honduras? I would have to say “friendship”. There are a variety of reasons. On one level, a group of people of various ages and from different backgrounds came together to accomplish a common goal. For me, all of the faces in this group were new, except for Dawn Parke, the other participant from our YMCA in Moncton. Also the majority of the group were YMCA employees, so, as a volunteer, I became one of a minority, an experience that often causes you to reassess your outlook.

Before long, however, we all began to realize that as a group we were a minority, outsiders trying to learn about this new place with a different language, and many things that were foreign to our experience. We found ourselves caught in a dichotomy, because there were things that looked familiar like the Pizza Hut restaurants and the Subway deli's, but there were armed guards outside the doors! Tegucigalpa was a city fraught with turmoil. During our stay we experienced an uprising of the country's teachers with protest marches, forcing road closures and civil upset. Fortunately, we had begun our journey through the mountains when this took place, but we sensed the severity of the problem and the potential danger. We were warned by our hosts to stay together as it was not safe to wander off.

Perhaps it was because we were a group of light-skinned “gringos”, but *we quickly realized the importance of taking care of each other. We shared food at mealtimes, so we could all experience new taste sensations. We shared tissues when we arrived at the gas station washroom, if there was “no paper”!* During our stay at the nature resort, the girls shared a large dorm with bunk-beds and we helped each other find the shower with the hot water! We were “like a family!”

When you find yourself in a place where you cannot speak the language, you rely on gestures, eye contact and help from others around you to get your message across. We were fortunate to have Tanya and Silke there to translate for us, to enable us to learn from the Honduran people. *We were all eager to understand what the Honduran youth had experienced, and it was wonderful to see so many of them willing to express themselves.* This interaction brings me back to the sense of “friendship” which developed with the Honduran people who appreciated the help from the Atlantic YMCAs so much. They saw us as the benefactors of these “Y” programs that were enabling them to improve their future. The training they received gave them the knowledge and confidence to want to make a difference in their communities. They wanted to be in a better situation than their parents. They were open to learning new ways of farming. They embraced new job skills in the computer field. As a group we felt a sense of pride, pride in them for their accomplishments and proud of our Atlantic Y’s for helping them have this opportunity.

Honduras wasn’t what I thought it would be.

I had a clear idea about what I’d find in a third world country. I was prepared. I’d seen the movies, the documentaries, studied up on the politics of the region and attended orientation. Intellectually I knew that we were there to observe and learn from the trip. But I think a piece of my ego still believed that I wouldn’t learn too much. My ego was mistaken.

As a peaceful Canadian the first thing I had to get used to was the constant presence of arms. Every security guard had a rifle. This is not something we see in New Brunswick on a daily basis. As I got around during the first 24 hours, the armed guards faded into the background very quickly. The security measures of razor wire, electric wire and security cameras didn’t distract from the urban and rural landscape. It became normal, and I, personally, felt safe everywhere we went.



Karin (fourth from the left standing) with YMCA volunteers and participants in Honduras.



Karin Sundin

Saint John YMCA-YWCA (continued)

Honduras is a very beautiful country with marvelous people and some unfortunate economic circumstances. As we traveled from neighbourhood to neighbourhood to see what the Honduran YMCA was all about, we met some very dedicated people. The Y offered classes in computers, citizenship and sexual health. To make sure the young parents could come and study, daycare was offered while they attended classes. After school programs were flourishing, and they offered a space to help with homework. The volunteers were enthusiastic and took great pride in the work they were doing as well as what they had learned. They see the bigger picture of what the Honduran YMCA is working toward. The people we met were proud of their achievements and were happy to show them off.



There was a current of excitement among the youth about how their contribution and dedication is helping to change their communities. There was no sense of entitlement or apathy. They were putting in the time and hard work that's needed to create change. They weren't looking for a handout, but a hand up.

One of the volunteers told us that she was very proud she grew up on a coffee plantation. She said she feels connected to our fund raising and the money we send down. The Atlantic Ys sell a "Honduran Solidarity Blend" coffee that comes from a small co-operative of coffee farmers in Marcala.

The citizenship classes help the community identify leaders for the future and gives them the tools they need to help make the changes they want to make. In collaboration with local government and other community groups, the YMCA is offering the foundation skills that will allow the grassroots movements of change to continue.

In both Marcala and Taulabe, the local mayors came to meet with us. They enjoyed talking about the positive changes they had seen in their own communities with the help of the ACJ youth. With a base of over 300 active volunteers to draw on, Rosibel Martínez, Secretaria General of the Honduran Y, is running an exciting organization that is aiming far into the future.

The places we saw and the people we met allow me to think that changes are happening on a grassroots level, and Honduras will grow into a stronger and more stable country. While I felt compassion for the people I also felt great admiration for their tenacity and for the vision they have of their Honduras. I hope I can impart a little of this vision to the youth of our own communities here at home.

We have a lot to learn from the Honduran ACJ.



Silke (center) and Tania Serrano (far right) and the staff of the Honduran YMCA: Ludwig Izaguirre, Accounting Assistant; Alexis Alvarez, General Administrator; and Rosibel Martínez, General Secretary.

I went to Honduras to discover more about a partnership that had existed on paper for a few years between 13 YMCAs in Canada (including my own) and the YMCA of Honduras. I was also hoping to learn more about the programming carried out by the YMCA of Honduras, as well as about the country itself.

Before leaving, a local newspaper published an article covering the purpose of this trip and the involvement of YMCAs in Canada. A few mistakes (assumptions) were published in the newspaper report – some minor, and one, I thought, to be quite critical: it stipulated that we, here in Canada, *created* programming for the YMCA of Honduras to carry out.

It is important to note that this is not the case for two reasons. One, because that is not how YMCA partnerships work – each YMCA determines the needs of its own community, and devises programming based on the expertise and resources available to that YMCA or community. Equally importantly, though, it would be impossible for us here in Canada to dream up such thorough, targeted and impactful programming for communities with which we had no experience. Only local experts could have developed such impressive programs, not to mention devise the most effective methods to carry them out: a participatory learning method is used for all training; a “train-the-trainer” approach is used to develop the next rounds of volunteers to carry out the programming in following years; and all-encompassing themes are addressed, incorporating gender equality and environmental responsibility into HIV/AIDS and citizenship training, self-esteem into computer training, and so on.

When I arrived in Honduras, I was informed about some of the harsh conditions the country faces – particularly since the 2009 coup, as well as the global economic crisis. In a “developing country” of almost 8 million people, 2 million more people have become unemployed over the last two years. This financial crisis has made crime rates spike – affecting lower and middle classes alike. Youth seeking jobs in vain end up in drug trafficking and are often killed as a result of turf wars. Gang members approach people demanding not only their wallets, but bank transfers – particularly if they see that you live in a middle class neighbourhood. If they ask for your wallet, cell phone, or even your dog, as one priest was asked to hand over, and you hesitate for even a second, you can be killed. If you throw out a receipt with your name or address on it, they will find you in your home. If they steal your cell phone and you have all your friends’ contact information in it, they will find your friends. It is in your best interest to never talk in public about where you work, or the fact that you have a job.

But gangs are not the only source of violence in the country. Paramilitary, police, and resistance movement alike can be violent. After the coup, if four or five people were standing around together, they could all be gunned down in the street, even if just one of them was guilty (or suspected) of a crime, or just for having a certain political opinion.

Other conditions that affect Honduras are that 70% of households are run by single mothers. There is a high rate of drug use, alcoholism and depression among men. Honduras has the highest HIV/AIDS rate in the region. The political environment is full of corruption and nepotism. There is a water shortage, so the government is currently rationing water. The worldwide fuel shortage is particularly affecting developing countries – the Honduran government tried limiting the number of days people could drive per week, but the situation became violent so they will soon have to start rationing gasoline. Climate change caused more floods and landslides last year than ever – causing many epidemics and, consequently, many deaths.

Considering all these conditions Hondurans face on a regular basis, it is really awe-inspiring to think that the YMCA of Honduras continues to carry out such strong programming in so many communities across the country, and positively affecting so many youth that many of them return to deliver the programming after they've graduated from it themselves.

Imagine if we, here in Atlantic Canada, had to consider being attacked on our way to work every day, and still found the courage to go to work and carry out socially responsible programming. Imagine if we had to ration water – not just drinking water, but also for washing hands and dishes, flushing toilets, and so on – and still run daycares. Imagine if we saw colleagues and fellow volunteers gunned down by gang members or police, and rather than staying home out of fear, we decided to write and act out plays about it to raise awareness about the issues. Imagine if we lived in a country where machismo was the rule, and we decided to hold training workshops about the implications of gender inequality; to raise awareness about HIV/AIDS prevention when sex is a taboo subject...



The YMCA of Honduras is courageously addressing social needs through alternative education. Rather than convincing people to take a certain side in politics and gender issues, they are merely a vehicle of information – they are raising the level of awareness and involvement of youth in these issues. They teach through raising stimulating questions, much like the Socratic method, rather than by lecturing and imposing notions of right and wrong.

I was overwhelmed by the amount of quality programming I saw. The fact that youth with so few resources organize environmental campaigns and clean-up days, when we, in a country full of resources at our fingertips, often treat environmental clean-up as a luxury itself (“I’ll help out if I have time... I’ll recycle if I don’t have to work too hard to do it...”) was equally stupefying for me. You might forgive me for finding it difficult to summarize all the courageous and impactful work I witnessed into this short reflection.

What I can easily state is that while we help financially support Honduran YMCA programming through sales of fair trade Honduran coffee and other fair trade products at Cultures Boutique (the YMCA of Fredericton’s non-profit store); and while we collaborate with the YMCA of Honduras in as many ways as possible... they are truly the experts in their field.



Canadian International
Development Agency

Agence canadienne de
développement international

Program undertaken with the financial support of the Government of Canada provided through the Canadian International Development Agency (CIDA).