



Last March, thirteen individuals from YMCAs in the Atlantic Provinces had the opportunity to visit our partner YMCA in Honduras. In this issue of the International Newsletter, as well as in coming Fall issue, the trip participants reflect on what they saw and experienced during their time in Honduras.

Tania Serrano, Fredericton YMCA

I am very grateful to have had the opportunity to take part in the trip to Honduras this past March. It was a life changing experience. Everything about our trip was eye opening. It was incredible to see the energy and the commitment to volunteerism that the staff and youth in Honduras have; their spirit was infectious. So much could be said about the trip, but I want to highlight two programs that made an impression on me.

The first was the Ludoteca in the barrio of San Francisco in Tegucigalpa. The work the Honduran YMCA has an impact not only on the life of the persons participating, but also in those individuals' communities as well.

What the youth learn in the program helps them find solutions to social problems.

One tool they use is called "the problem tree."

In a performance prepared for us on March 15, youth at the Ludoteca presented the activity this way:

The roots of the problem tree are causes including:

- the worldwide recession
- new technology that has replaced labor intensive work

- Corruption
- lack of opportunities and professional training
- favoritism of political parties
- Illiteracy and low levels of education



Tania with a participant in the Ludoteca Program

The trunk of the problem tree is the problem itself:

- Unemployment

The consequences are the fruit the problem tree bears:

- High number of murders and injuries
- Urban migration
- Increase in crime
- Addictions
- Health problems
- Prostitution
- Drug dealing
- Discontent with the state
- Social unrest
- Destruction of family life
- Broken homes
- Future consequences for the children, among others.

The problem tree exercise is used by YMCA facilitators to identify a problem which requires an urgent action plan that can be solved by the steps taken by people, institutions and organizations.

Tania Serrano-continued

We were impressed by how well the performance went. The youth were comfortable with the crowd despite the fact that we were foreigners.

In the Ludoteca, the rooms were filled with energetic young people, cheering, smiling and eager to show us around. In each room we entered, the walls told the same story: the YMCA was doing so much with so few resources. They were making the best of whatever help they got.

I was also delighted to have the opportunity to sit in on a gender equality workshop in the province of La Paz. The facilitators started by having members of the group introduce themselves; they told us “You are with family here; we are all part of the world YMCA family.”



The workshop was very dynamic. It was a group of 24 participants most of whom were male—which was very interesting given the topic. In one activity, the task was to divide a whole chicken among the family members—mother, father, a pregnant daughter, a teenage daughter, an older son, and a baby of three. They were to divide it as it would be in their homes. Usually, priority was given to the father who had worked all day, and the last member to eat or who ate what is left over was the mother.

During the debriefing, it was exciting to see how actively involved the men were in pointing out how unfair this was and to hear how comfortable they were in talking about topics such as “machismo.”

Despite all the social problems and challenges these youth are faced with every day, YMCA programs allow them to improve their soft and hard skills, build their self esteem, develop friendships and learn about their rights. The YMCA gives them the tools for community development; they learn to identify problems within their communities and how to take effective action to solve these problems. These youth get involved in environmental demonstrations, learn to present formal proposals to municipalities, and participate in cultural events and health fairs. They even have a radio program through which they address different topics and express their opinions.

It was very rewarding to see how successful these projects are and the impact they make in each community. It is also great to meet the competent, dedicated and talented YMCA staff members and volunteers that are making all this possible. Kudos to them! They are an incredibly strong team, with a strong vision and mission. It left me wondering if we are doing enough to facilitate their mission. How else could we help? We have so much to learn from them and so much to give.

I believe we should create our own tree, not a problem tree but rather a solution tree. What are the root problems we wish to seek solutions for? What will our solutions be? And what kind of fruit will our solution tree bear? – for the benefit of our youth and the youth of Honduras.

Beverly Brace, YMCA of Exploits Valley

On March 13, I embarked on my first trip outside of Canada. I was one of the two representatives from the YMCA of Exploits Valley (Newfoundland) taking part in a visit to the YMCA of Honduras in order to see their programs and to review the terms of our partnership agreement.

We were the last to arrive in Tegucigalpa and were greeted by an enthusiastic group made up of our fellow Canadian visitors and our Honduran hosts. By the end of the trip, we had formed a special bond, and I will remember dearly the respect for and support of each other and the desire to learn from the YMCA in Honduras.



Beverly outside Ludoteca

In ten days, we visited 4 YMCA sites, a school, and went to an HIV fair put on by the YMCA. The Honduran General Secretary [Executive Director], Rosibel Martínez was very passionate about the work of the YMCA. She has gained the respect of all who work with and around her. The many volunteers from the programs show the same passion, and it works like a pay-it-forward system—where youth leaders take part in the programs then go to their communities to carry out the work, preparing the next level of youth to do the same and so on. I think that was what had the greatest impact on me—the Y's commitment to reach as many youth in Honduras as possible. Young people in Honduras face many challenges—unplanned pregnancy, the dangers of HIV/AIDS, drugs, unemployment, lack of access to education. There is YMCA programming to address all of these issues.

Rosibel and her team looked after us well and kept us safe at all times. We had a full agenda. In addition to learning about their work, we got to see 460 kms of the country by bus. We visited the historic Santa Lucia Church, visited the underground caves in Taulabe and toured the Mayan Ruins in Copan. We managed to go for a nature walk (during a program session), walked to an HIV Fair, where we were the guests of honor, and shopped at markets in Copan and Tegucigalpa.

Each of the thirteen of us from Canada had our individual expectations, but I think that we all left with the same feeling of awe. The programs surpassed anything that I had imagined, and the way they were delivered was beyond admirable.

Dawn Parke *YMCA of Moncton*



Dawn with a guide at Copan

From March 14 to March 23, I had the privilege of joining Y staff and volunteers from Atlantic Canada on a partnership visit to the YMCA of Honduras.

As a Canadian, there are many things we all take for granted. This trip was truly a learning experience for me. Some of the things I observed and learned:

- By the front doors of the airport was a lady in dirty, tattered clothing using a stick of wood as a crutch. She had a severely twisted leg and had been reduced to begging to survive. She was clearly struggling to remain upright while she asked people for money. Everyone walking by ignored her pleas.
- To me, it was a slap in the face making me aware how different things were here. Of course in Canada we have people begging on the streets, yet I could not recall having ever witnessed someone with a physical disability in such dire straights.
- Driving through Tegucigalpa, we saw that poverty in Honduras is much different than in Canada. Our hosts, concerned about our safety, escorted us everywhere. We really stuck out in spite of our efforts not to draw too much attention to ourselves. I couldn't help but notice the high walls, razor wire and armed guards everywhere we went, and it made me appreciate all the open spaces in our Canadian cities.
- The youth participating in the Citizenship Formation Program at the Ludoteca in Colonia de San Francisco were some of the most positive, dynamic volunteers that I have ever had the privilege to meet. Their resources were few, and the building was in need of repair. Still they were very excited to share what they had with us.
- The Citizenship Formation, Computer training and HIV/AIDS Awareness programs facilitated by the Honduran Y are respected by community leaders, educators and parents for making a difference in the lives of their youth participants, volunteers and staff.
- Being a volunteer in Honduras gives purpose and self-identity to those who contribute to promoting the work of the Honduran YMCA. As in Canada, the YMCA organization would be nothing without its volunteers!
- The Honduran staff and volunteers embody the meaning of sharing and collaborating – a humbling lesson we should adapt more often.
- In a country where Women's Rights are not prominent, it was wonderful to talk to and learn that at least half of the participants the YMCA funded Citizenship Formation, HIV/AIDS Awareness and Computer training programs are girls and young women.



Jessica Allen YMCA of Cumberland

In March, I took part in the visit to Honduras as a representative of the international Committee from the Cumberland YMCA in Amherst, Nova Scotia. I was approached by Mac Hawco, another committee member who has had the opportunity to travel with the International Program on two previous occasions. His enthusiasm about his experiences encouraged me to become involved in the International Committee.

The objectives of our trip were to strengthen relationships with our International partners through gaining an understanding of the environment they work and live in, and what programming they deliver at their YMCA locations.



Jessica learning a Honduran dance

The YMCA of Honduras was founded in 1990. Its mission is to improve living standards for youth and to help young people understand and access the political, economic, cultural and educational systems in their country. Their priority is youth between the ages of 16-30.

While in Honduras we had the opportunity to visit several YMCA locations, all of which delivered programming to children, youth and young adults in their immediate and surrounding areas. After a few visits, it was easy to see that the staff and volunteers of the YMCA take great pride in program development and execution. Many programs were reviewed, however the regional partnership with the Ys of Atlantic Canada provide assistance for the two in particular: the Citizenship Formation Program and the HIV/AIDS Prevention Program.

At each YMCA site we visited, we received a warm welcome from the volunteers, staff and members. Then a presentation of programs was provided as well as an opportunity to interact with people from that specific YMCA location. In addition we often were able to meet with community leaders, such as mayors, and representatives from other organizations who associated themselves with the Y. This provided further opportunity to gain information about the challenges youth in the area face. We learned about the societal gaps in wealth and fortune, and it became more apparent that the YMCA plays a vital role in filling the gaps when it comes to education for those who are not able to attend Private School or pay to study at College. The YMCA provides basic skills programs to allow development for individuals to either sustain a living for themselves or find work.

As the days went on, the group bonded and had an opportunity to share an amazing experience in a collective effort to assist with improving conditions in another part of the world. On the last day both Canadians and Hondurans came together to review the partnership that is currently in place and discuss suggestions for the future. At that time I thought of the YMCA mission "The YMCA in Canada is dedicated to the growth of all persons in spirit, mind and body, and to their sense of responsibility to each other and to the global community." I was honored to be able to put this mission at the forefront as we were actively being responsible to each other and our global community. My experience was one of kind and one I will never forget. Going forward I will encourage international development projects and encourage anyone who might be interested to contact their local YMCA to see how they can become part of the "bigger picture."

Mac Hawco YMCA of Cumberland

Before going to Honduras, I had been to the Dominican Republic and Cuba to visit YMCAs in those countries. I was expecting this experience to be different from those, and it was. It is hard to explain the work that the YMCA is doing, because most people in Canada see the YMCA as a building that offers gym and swim programs. In Honduras the YMCA is something different—it is a movement based on certain clear values.



Mac (with ball cap) & other Canadian visitors

I was very impressed with the involvement of youth in all the programs run by the Y. Most of the young leaders have participated in YMCA programs in the past and continuing to volunteer in those programs is their way of giving back. Most of the staff are volunteers and are sincerely dedicated to helping the youth of the country.

At each site we visited, we were met with handshakes and smiles from the volunteers, participants, and sometimes local politicians who were excited to meet us and tell us about their programs and how the programs had affected the people of the community. At times, we were tired, but that would all change as soon as someone started talking about the programs and the YMCA in Honduras.

We had a chance to see how the people of the country lived, to see the work the Y is doing, and to meet some of the participants and leaders. Their stories of how they got involved with the YMCA were inspiring; people became involved because they saw the value of the Y for their communities.

I was very proud to be part of the YMCA movement which is helping to shape a future for these young people.