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The Final Peace

Logan Hayes

Logan Hayes (class of 2018) enjoys live music, bonfires, and spontaneity. Since writing this essay, he has changed his major from journalism to broadcasting and digital media.

I was doing my absolute best to pay attention to my professor's lecture in my digital logic design class – it's even worse than it sounds, – but my mind was being rather stubborn. One part of me was trying to understand what in the world a tri-state buffer was, while the other was wondering why I was even in this class. I began questioning myself in the middle of class: why am I an engineering major? They make a lot of money, my dad is one, and I did well at math in high school. When I realized these were the best answers I had, I knew I was doing something wrong. The perfect plan I had laid out in my mind was shattering before me, and suddenly, my future was a mess of loose puzzle pieces. Something had to change, and that thought scared me. As I sat there, now nervous and defeated, I thought about that day six months ago that would mean more than I could ever have foreseen. Unbeknownst to me, the changing had already started.

I stepped off of a bus into a city teeming with people like ants in an anthill, each person fixed on his or her destination. Three-wheeled tuk-tuks slalomed in and out of the crowd, clouding the air behind them with dust. Their high-pitched horns beeped incessantly. Women balanced baskets of fruit on their heads. Myriad street vendors lined the sidewalks selling freshly made food. The sights, sounds, and smells begged me to stop to take it all in. However, the only thing I had time to think about was keeping up with my group's brisk pace. I was terrified of getting separated from them in the mass chaos. I blindly followed my group into a vast supermarket. Here, people were selling things of all sorts: food, jewelry, clothing, furniture, paintings, and wooden toys such as puzzles and spinning tops. Without explanation, my group leader

purchased a melon, two papayas, and two mangos, and then we were off into the bedlam once more. We trekked four more miles through the city until we finally made it outside. Here, we saw the elaborate mansions of the rich, homes that even most Americans would envy. Not far past these was the tall, rusted archway that opened up to Milagro.

The red dirt path powdered beneath my treading feet through the large archway. *Bienvenidos a el Milagro de Dios*, it read. Translation: “Welcome to the Miracle of God.” Far from it, I thought. One-roomed, makeshift slums scattered as far as I could see. The pathway took me past sites I wasn’t ready to witness. Mounds of trash speckled the community. Naked children scampered about, their skin stretched over exposed ribs. Barrels of green, mosquito-infested drinking water stood outside some of the “homes” – I hesitate even calling them that. I had been on overseas mission trips before, but this was the first time I was face-to-face with such overwhelming poverty and suffering. As we passed, Salvadoran men and women examined us. They were not accustomed to seeing a group of white people marching through their community. Their expressions were neither joyful nor sorrowful. Instead, they were neutral and stern. I was an outsider, and I was scared. I felt unwelcome and distant from these people, and I wanted to leave. But I knew I had no other choice, so I reluctantly continued to walk.

Once we were in Milagro, I was thankful I was no longer being rushed. I focused on the rhythmic beat of our muffled steps against the dirt path. Nothing was said, as we were all fixed on the scenes before us. We continued in silence until our group leader stopped us outside of one particular home. Four long and thin tree limbs stuck out of the ground supporting a square piece of aluminum sheet metal. Scraps of metal, trash, and wood wove together to construct the walls like a crude puzzle.

“Rosa!” he called – then silence. “Rosa!” he bellowed once more.

I stood back and watched as an aged Salvadoran woman emerged from the home. She stood there gazing at us without moving. This made me even more uneasy than I already was. I shuffled one step back in the loose dirt. She reached into her shirt pocket, pulled out a pair of thin-framed glasses, and put them on.

Immediately, her expression changed from confused to euphoric. She dashed toward our group leader, hugging and kissing him. She then ran toward the rest of the group to do the same. She hugged me, and I had to bend down to let her kiss me on the cheek.

In Spanish, she jabbered, “My children, my brothers, my sisters. I am so happy to have my family here!” Suddenly, a lighthearted mood replaced the tense one that had lingered over the whole day. I knew there was something special about Rosa.

She invited us into her home and prompted us to have a seat near the back wall. The chair I sat on was a plastic bucket sitting upside-down on her dirt floor. A mattress sat on the floor against the wall opposite from me. A wooden table stood to my right, cluttered with dirty and broken knick-knacks she had scavenged from the city and landfills. We gave her the fruit we had purchased earlier in the day as a gift. Without hesitation, she cut and peeled it and served all of it to us. Then, she spun out the back entrance and returned momentarily with cups of soup and beans. I had grown weary from all of the walking we had already done, so I was grateful for the food. The soup was warm and delicious, but when I took my first bite of beans, my insides cringed. They were cold and I couldn’t tell if they were even cooked. In my hunger, I craved warm, delectable beans, not the chilled beans lumped together in my cup. But I soon grasped the scope of what she was doing for us, and I realized the enormity of my own selfishness. Rosa just gave away all of the food she had for the week, and she would now have to go to extra lengths to make up for it. I had never seen such sacrificial giving before, and I was now thankful for each individual bean I forced down my gullet. As we ate, she told us the story of how she ended up in Milagro.

“My husband and I lived in a poor rural community in the mountains.” She began. “When he got a job in the city, we were both so happy. The government owned this plot of land just outside of the city, and if enough people paid them fifty dollars, they would build a new community there. It would be called ‘Milagro de Dios’. They would build nice clean houses, and there would be shipments of clean water every week. We sold everything we had to get the money, and we paid our fifty dollars. Over a thousand people paid the money to live in this new community, and we were all there on the day they were going to start building, but no one showed up to

build. After that first day, my husband left for his first day of work in the city. He didn't come back that night, and I never saw him again. After a week, we knew no one was coming to build, so we built the whole place on our own. And now, ten years later, no one has ever brought us clean water." When she finished her story, we thanked her for sharing, then a piercing silence settled among us. To this day, I still think about that moment immediately after she finished speaking. I fully realized the irony of the situation I was in. I came to this woman's home to serve her, but here she was serving me in capacities I wasn't capable of. She didn't open up her home to me to impress me. She didn't serve me all the food she had to make herself look good. She did it because she genuinely loved and cared for me. After all the hardship she has been forced to deal with, she still puts the needs of other people high above her own, even if they don't speak the same language as her. I thought of the people living in the luxurious homes less than a mile from Milagro, and I knew Rosa was far better off than them. Meeting Rosa was the most humbling experience of my life, and I desperately wanted others to know about her. The first half of the puzzle was coming into place. I snapped out of my daydream when my professor dismissed us from class. For the last forty-five minutes, I didn't listen to a single word of his lecture. I made my way across campus in the brisk October wind with Rosa still on my mind. When I arrived at my dorm room, I sat down at my desk and noticed the latest issue of *Relevant Magazine* lying there. Gradually, more and more of the missing pieces were coming together.

Relevant puts names and faces to many of the third-world issues we don't like to think about such as sex-trafficking, slavery, and poverty. The stories are told of actual individuals who are suffering from these things, people like Rosa, and what others are doing to help them. Before my El Salvador trip, I knew these injustices existed and I knew they were bad, but they were so far from anything I had ever experienced that they were difficult to connect with. I never gave them a second thought. But now, after developing an actual relationship with someone living this way, everything changed. I realized that there are Rosas all over the world suffering in ways most people may not be able to comprehend. I was apathetic before meeting Rosa, but now I deeply care. I yearned for people to understand and care. *Relevant* showed me that I could focus my life on telling others the stories of people like Rosa.

The next day, I changed my major to journalism and added a minor in intercultural communication. My experiences with Rosa and Relevant helped me fit many essential pieces of the puzzle. Relevant showed me that just having these memories stored inside of me wasn't enough. I needed to take initiative and do something about them. They helped me take this first crucial step, but I know I still have a long way to go. The puzzle will likely never come to completion, but I can find comfort knowing the next piece will always be within my grasp.