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At the beginning of the school year I signed up for a class called "Field Studies in Belize." I thought it was going to be a study tour of Belize in which we would visit different villages and cities and learn more about the culture; however, this was not the case. What I quickly learned was that this class was only called a class in order to give students an opportunity to commit so much time to a single project. Instead of just reading articles and discussing culture, I spent my time designing a service project to implement over spring break. A classmate and I chose to work on developing a community garden project for a school in the rural fishing village of Seine Bight. When we first received our project, the task before us seemed almost impossible. To design and implement a garden in a country we knew very little about was overwhelming. But as time passed, the project evolved and we gained new members whom added to our confidence in our ability to complete the project. Despite the ever changing obstacles, one thing remained constant: we were committed to getting the project done, and getting it done well.

Before we all knew it, spring break was upon us and it was time to pack our bags and finally travel to Belize. It took us six hours by bus on unpaved roads to wind our way down from Belize City to our host village of Seine Bight, but we made it. Our first order of business was to meet our host families for the week and take our bags to their homes. This was one of my favorite portions of the trip because by living with the local families I feel we got a more realistic view of Belize. I stayed with one other girl from our group in a home owned by two males, Isaac and Kelvan. Although it took everyone a while to warm up to each other, we ended up having a great time. Isaac is a school teacher in a neighboring town and Kelvan used to own a restaurant,

but now does private catering for the village, so we ate very well all week. However, as far as economic status goes I ended up living with one of the most well off families in the village. It was amazing to me how different each persons home stay experience was. There were four groups, including myself. One group stayed with the vice principal of the school who had sent her children to live in another village, another group stayed with a woman who had about 8



children and ran a local grocery store and the final person stayed with a man who's wife was in the hospital. We all saw such different aspects of village life, from Kelvan and Isaac who were so concerned with preserving culture and advancing the village to families who were just trying to make

it by.

We arrived in Seine Bight on a Saturday and began working on Monday. Our first order of business was to clear the ground and build some raised beds. We had anticipated on working with sandy soil but what we had not planned on having to dig up a small village in that soil. At least that was our joke. We dug up coconut trees, endless amounts of wood and wire, a baby crib and even a couch. Later in the week we learned that our finds weren't the products of archaeology but simply a matter of coincidence considering that the school was built on top of an old garbage dump. While it slowed our work down, it in no way stopped us. We pushed through hot afternoons and long days, often working from 7am until 6pm with an hour break for lunch. There were moments of frustration, like when we came back one morning to find our irrigation line ripped up, or when it took us three hours to just clear one corner of a bed, but whenever we were down the local kids always found a way to cheer us up. It is hard to be depressed in the

face of 400 primary school students so full of life. They loved to come out in the garden and help with tools and play with the dirt. They would come out before school, during breaks, and would stay until dinner after school. It was sometimes hard for them to work correctly for that long of a period of time, and they would often side track us with their games. But we didn't mind, in fact, we would often stay late just to get a chance to play with the kids.

During the school week, our work wasn't limited to gardening; we also took time out of the day to teach different grades about agricultural sciences. The school system in Belize is a



direct product of their British history. The schools are very formal and the children learn mainly reading, writing, arithmetic and the bible. Science in the classroom is very limited. So we wanted to bring this to the children, as a way to get them excited about the garden and prepare them to take care of the garden after

we left. We had lessons in water, soils, plants, composting, gardening skills and nutrition. I was personally responsible for the plants and garden skills lesson plans. I went over basic plant parts and functions, plant nutrition, disease, and photosynthesis. Then we would go out in the garden and learn how to use the different tools, and talked about garden planning and seasonal chores. Finally, the kids would get a chance to work in the garden, with just their class, which they loved. But they weren't the only ones learning. I gained a whole new appreciation for my primary and high school teachers, having to learn how to adapt failing lesson plans in a moments notice, or filling a half hour time period because the students just breezed through the lesson plans. The rewards for our work were immense. Some included the children eagerly raising their hands, and even jumping out of their seats in class and talking over top of each other in order to

be able to give an opinion or answer a question. But the best feeling was when we were in the garden and the students asked us question based on what they had learned. I remember when one student approached me wanting to know more about the soil we were working with, so we taught him how to do a basic soil test by feel.

Thursday is a day I'll never forget. We came into the garden early because we had a great amount of work to do, so much in fact, that our spirits were dampened just trying to imagine how we would ever get it all done. Then, after the bell rang to start class, a flood of Standard VI (8th grade) students rounded the corner in gym clothes



and offered to help us for the whole day. Within about two hours they had dug out a fourth garden bed. And they didn't stop there. With the help of the teacher we were able to find a local carpenter who would donate all his extra saw dust to be used as mulch for the gardens. We



gathered extra wood from around the school and built boxes for the fruit trees we got for the school. Our level of productivity was amazing. When we stopped that evening we looked around, and it had finally all come together.

After one and a half long semesters of planning, and four days of intense labor we had accomplished all we had set out to do and more. When we first saw the land, we thought maybe we would be able to finish two beds, which could at least act as a template for future beds. By the end of Thursday, we had built four beds complete with irrigation, planted four trees in homemade boxes, built and started two composters, and repaired

and planted a seedling bed. There was no better feeling than going home on Thursday after looking at what we had been able to accomplish in a few days.

Friday was a bittersweet experience. We not only had to say goodbye to our home stays whom we had become so attached to, but also to the school who had opened its arms to us and really made the project possible. The school sent us off with a little farewell party. They shared with us their traditional dance and the students presented us with armfuls of thank you letters. I know I may have sweated more than I tanned on this break, but it was the best I have ever had and I am forever grateful for those who made it possible with their funding.



Before



After