Skylar Peyton

Do it Anyway

The experiences I had in Chimbote are some that I will reflect back on for years to come. From the exquisite landscapes to the hospitable citizens, Peru gave the group and me an extremely warming welcome. Though the trip ended faster than any of us wanted, even with the extra day delay, there were many lessons learned. When looking at the five pillars of ABE – social justice, community, reflection, learning, and intention living – there were instances, conversations, and experiences with all of them.

It’s hard to go to a place like Chimbote and not see some kind of need for social justice reform. The conditions of some houses and standard of living of many people in the community pull at the heart strings. Social justice, however, is more than feeding the hungry or fixing a house, it is figuring out why they are hungry or homeless and working towards a solution. Many of the walls in Chimbote had different writings and pictures on them. When we asked the locals what it was about, they told us that they just had an election and the depictions were advertisements. The many who won’s name is Waldo. He has been in power before, kicked out for corruption, but promised each family 500 soles. This is 1/3 the average families’ annual income. I don’t think it is necessary to say that it is highly unlikely Waldo is going to follow through on his promise. On top of that, the reason there even was an election is because the former mayor *and* president are currently in jail on numerous felonies ranging from bribery and embezzlement to paying fifteen and sixteen year olds to shoot judges. With so much corruption, the hard part isn’t trying to understand how such conditions exist, but how they aren’t worse.

Now I don’t mean to leave it on such a bleak note. The fight for social justice is more like war than just a single battle. With time, education, and persistence there will be a change, but one thing that is completely out of anyone’s control is the community. Given many of the circumstances, it is absolutely understandable that people would lose morale. However the community of Chimbote is not one falling apart. All the people we met were so extraordinarily happy to be around us. Now I am not foolish in thinking that there are no problems or arguments, I know there are, but I was surprised by the ease many people had with their hardships. I have a hunch that Fr. Jack has had a huge impact on the self-esteem of the town. The fact we could get into almost any taxi and tell them to go to Father Jack’s mission and they all understand is proof to that.

Many people have asked me since I have returned what my favorite part of the trip was. Though there were many, many wonderful memories, people, and opportunities in Peru, the reflection every night was what stuck with me the most. The group I went with had many different personalities each understanding and processing the events of the day differently. Reflection was like seeing the day through a different perspective every time someone spoke. Also, since we are so different, each night’s reflection was extremely different. We did yoga and journaling and star gazing and discussions. I learned a lot from the first hand experiences, but I gained real wisdom from hearing the other perspectives of the same activities. The group was not quiet either. There really wasn’t awkward pauses or times when no one wanted to participate. Even the shier members of the group put in their two sense and at their own pace. With how much thoughtful deliberation and preparation Kaylee and I put into choosing the participants and scheduling meetings so they could get to know each other, it was a relief to see how well they melded together.

It’s impossible to go on a trip like this and not learn. Even just the experience with the airlines and flight cancelations was a learning curve for most of us! One of the things we stressed before even leaving was the sense of going to be with the people of Peru not going for them which we all took to heart. Our volunteer coordinator Claudia told me multiple times that we were one of the first groups to want to walk around Chimbote in a free time, eat the actual Peruvian food, and experience the true lifestyle people have. I think the intention to come and learn rather than “fix” set our group up for an authentic experience. I learned many things, some as superficial as the importance of sunscreen and many others deeper than that.

Intentional living is the fifth and final pillar of ABE. It’s not a tricky one to figure out. It’s actually quite easy to look at a situation and say “I’m going to waste less” or “I will cherish my family more.” The harder part of this is to actually follow through. There were quite a few things we saw in Peru I am sure we all would have liked to change. One thing I especially noticed is the garbage. When we talked with the people in the parish about garbage and where it went, no one really knew. It makes sense! Many families here are just trying to put food on the table or get a job. I would be surprised if the environment or garbage disposal was ever brought up at the dinner table. As one person put it “we think we are small, that our garbage waste is small. I don’t think anyone thinks it matters.” It’s understandable, but not true. Especially after seeing the beach and all the garbage that was lying around, I have so many questions. How, for starters, can sustainability be introduced into countries who have pressing, prominent problems? It’s hard to get people to recycle when they can’t afford their medical bills. While I may not know the answer to all the questions, I can and plan on looking into them. Until then, though, I can lessen my own footprint.

Social justice, community, reflection, learning and intentional living have different meanings to each trip and each participant. I had both individual and shared experiences with these five pillars on my trip to Peru. Ask a different member of the group and you could receive a completely unique, fresh perspective. That is one of the beautiful things about service – people adapt the impact to their own lives depending on their journey. While this trip had some difficulties with things breaking – wallets, luggage, planes – it was a phenomenal experience that brought the group, and a little bit of the world, together.