

The Blank Walls

They did not mind letting Lorenzo scrape, since no harm could be done on a wall that did not matter. Actually, scraping did not really matter either, because the paint was not even peeling.

The volunteers had come last week, dropped off like a box of foreign aid. Once opened, you found your standard fixed-smiled over-zealous twenty-something year-olds, made instantly after adding hot coffee. They came in brightly coloured t-shirts that bore sweepingly vague statements such as “Making a Difference” or “Impacting Lives”. However, unlike the clips of disaster one sees on CNN, the victims did not reciprocate in eager gratitude. These specific recipients were mentally or physically challenged, and did not understand the meaning of such assistance.

“Not like that, you have to push with the edge,” explained Larry while Lorenzo kept attacking the wall with the scraper. Lorenzo resembled a cat swatting at a moving shadow on a wall. He did not listen for two reasons: one, he had Down syndrome; and two:

“Vamos usar la pintura... de mucho! Me gusta amarillo...”

He spoke Spanish, not English. It was foreign aid with the instructions in another language.

“That’s right Lorenzo; you got it, that’s how you scrape a wall.” Larry smiled and continued to paint while Lorenzo changed from swatting to a motion resembling scratching. That wall did not matter.

Over the past week the volunteers had learned the routine at this special school. The students arrived at 7:00a.m. via a special bus that could only take four special kids at a time. The kids that arrived first either set-up the chairs for class or sat chatting with each other in conversations neither would ever remember. By the time all the kids arrived the different classrooms will have been set up by either the few kids who could or by the volunteer teachers. There was the Life classroom, where kids learned how to do things like brush their teeth, tie their shoes, and how to not drool on each other. There was the Academic classroom, where kids learned to spell their name, to add numbers less than ten, and to sing catchy songs. Lastly, there was the Workshop, where the more able kids made piñatas, hammocks, and

jewellery to sell in the school store for their own personal income, and to help the school make money. The Workshop wasn't in any classroom – it was anywhere that was available. Space was a luxury this school could not afford, as exemplified by the main office that doubled as the janitor's closet. For storage, the piñatas of clowns and animals that the kids made hung from the ceiling. It looked like a frozen carnival above the kids below.

What the volunteers also noticed was that the same lessons kept being taught. Or was it the same lessons kept being forgotten? It did not matter. The same kids would brush their teeth incorrectly each day and then go and sing the same catchy songs out of tune. Maybe it was catchy only because it was sung so often, like the song you say you abhor but your mind hums unconsciously. It was something that built up over time and people learned to endure, like the garbage pile outside the school or the normal kids that came by and jeered during recess.

When lunch rolled around, the workshop materials had to be put away and the chairs and tables brought out from the classrooms. The kids in wheelchairs automatically waited off to the sides so they would not get in the way. They were used to being in the way. On the crumbling street sidewalks, people in a hurry would try to squeeze by. If inhibited, they would give the look of 'my-time-is-more-important-than-your-time', kicking up dusts of disgust as they slide by. The lucky few, who did not have inferiority drilled into them by society, helped out. Guillermo, the de facto leader with OCD, yelled at the other helpers to move tables that were already being moved. Satisfied that his peers were supposedly following his orders, he would proceed to adjust the tables so that there was not the smallest crack between them. This frustrated him every day, as the tables were donated, and the school was lucky if they did not wobble or have profanity written all over them, never mind if they could all match in height and width. So each day, when Guillermo broke down in frustration and went to the front gate to yell at passing Tuk Tuk's to drive straighter, the volunteers knew that everything was set up

and lunch was about to be served. Here, eating was not the process of gaining strength, but more a motion of suppressing weakness. The kids ate as much as they could, and the floor ate the rest.

The task at hand was vague – “make the school look good”, which is in line with what a volunteer is supposed to do – “good things”. Painting the school was a good thing. Letting the kids help was a good thing. Everything being done there was a good thing. These were ideas that had built up in the volunteers’ minds over time from bake sales and university applications. The simple act of being in a developing country is a good thing.

Aside from the autistic ones, the kids forgot the volunteers’ names on a daily basis; although, they did remember the people, and their unique personality traits. They knew Sebastian was the funny guy, who likes to put paint on your face when you weren’t looking. They knew Leigh to be really encouraging, always shoving a paintbrush in your hand and clapping and whistling before you even stepped on the ladder. They knew Markus to be more interactive, always asking kids what animals they liked, then painting them onto the walls. So what was it that they remembered – the good things or the good people? What was it that built up over time – the layers of paint or the layers of encouragement and self-esteem?

Dawson was known as the questioner. His glasses were always sliding down his nose, giving him the impression of one who was always analyzing the world below him. “Por qué” was his favourite phrase, and “por qué” was his favourite follow-up. On the last day, Dawson had drawn an airplane on the wall. When the finishing strokes were applied, he came down and gave Ines a high-five for holding the ladder for him. In broken Spanish, he asked her if she knew what he had drawn.

“Avión!”

“Do you like airplanes?”

“Yes... I like them very much!”

“Por qué?”

“So I can see the world.”

“Why do you want to do that?”

“So I can remember all the beautiful places in the world.”

With that, Dawson began to draw a triangular tower, below which he wrote “France”. Then he drew a really long wall, below which he wrote “China”. Then he drew a person holding a flame and wrote underneath “America”. On and on he drew, while Ines stood watching. The pyramids of Egypt, the mountains of Tibet, and kangaroos in Australia – the world materialized in front of Ines, without her so much as turning her head. The other volunteers had stopped what they were doing, and the kids in the Workshop had put down their tools. They were watching Dawson draw these monumental places in the world – places that would never go away, places that would never fade from the memory of humanity. Then he drew the school. He told them that they were a part of this world, and that for him it was as beautiful and monumental as the rest.

He painted it on the wall that did not matter. None of the walls mattered, including the ones that stood around watching. They were blank slates for the things that did matter.