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Learning through Solidarity

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After receiving bachelor degrees in biology and environmental science at Aquinas College in 1999, Rob Dodde spent six months in an overseas solidarity program. Three of those months were spent in Brazil. He currently works at Dwelling Place, Inc. in the Heartside Neighborhood of Grand Rapids as a community organizer through AmeriCorps VISTA.

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Stepping off the plane was when it slapped me across the face. I felt like I had crossed a barrier, some liquefied trans-dimensional portal beyond which my language skills would be rightfully deemed ineffective, not to mention the cultural norms twenty-four years of American life had implanted in me. I had studied and researched and endlessly discussed numerous aspects of Brazil, but at that moment my knowledge seemed only to add a tinge of excitement and awe to the nervousness that was seeping out of my fingertips.

I had just begun the three month “overseas” portion of a six-month solidarity-development program that continues even today to challenge my ways of thinking about the world around me and how I can best work in it. As I absorbed the essence of my new surroundings I know my axioms would be twisted, corkscrewed, and reconfigured as I tried to fit these new experiences to my own worldview. Not even my first cigarette in Brazil, an event many of us talked about on our eleven-hour plane trip, could keep me from shaking incessantly (okay, the smoking added to the shaking) as I thought about what Brazil had in store for me.

Brazil boasts the ninth largest gross national product in the world, yet 75% of its people are classified as poor. One reason for this is Brazil’s highly unequal land-tenure, which continues to stagger the imagination. When the country was first “discovered” 500 years ago the land was divided into only fourteen lots, each of which had a single owner. Today Brazil has the second worst concentration of land in the world, with 1% of the population owning almost 50% of the land. This unequal concentration of land has given Brazil over 4,000,000 rural families who have no land to cultivate and has also forced millions more into Brazil’s unique slum-towns, the favelas.
Whatever the difficulties these statistics may imply for the masses of Brazilian poor, it certainly hasn’t stunted the evolution of culture within the country. *Capoeira*, a form of African foot fighting that inspired break-dancing in the US, is still held onto tightly and practiced by nearly every Brazilian community in the city of Salvador. Afro-Brazilians have also infused Catholicism into traditional African religions. These and many other unique aspects of Brazilian culture made my experience unforgettable. From eating *goiaba* (the national dessert) in Sao Paulo to sipping *chimarrão* (a ‘tea’ drunken communally in a circle) in Nova Laranjeras, a small rural town where I lived for a month, my tongue was tantalized. My eyes followed as visions of the legendary waterfalls of Faz de Iguacu and underground oceans flooded my mind. The sensual and powerful voices of musicians Chico Buarque and Chico Science filled the silent times between numerous conversations with joy. The feel of farming dark red soil tainted with the blood and sweat of thousands and embraces from Penha in Recife made me rethink how I should live my life. Waiting in Recife to find out whether some of my friends had been killed in Curitiba (a state capital where truckers and landless peasants were protesting a doubling in toll fares), and witnessing the *favelas* of Rio de Janeiro and Recife left me and others crying, appalled by the injustice, frightened at the knowledge that this is all too common in Brazil.

My nineteen teammates and I had already spent two months together before landing in Brazil, fund-raising in order to do our work there. For three weeks we stomped the streets of Boston, New York, and Ithaca asking our fellow sidewalk stampers for their spare change, just to then go door to door each night to ask all over again. We were challenged repeatedly with rejections and harsh questions as to why we were doing this. Yet we also met and bonded with many people whom we quickly came to associate ourselves with in so many ways except one—we knew where we were sleeping that...
This is a picture of me taking some time out from laying brick to think about the mental changes I was going through. Although my teammates and I were able to fund the building of a processing plant for a farming cooperative, the most radical change took place within ourselves and how we'll interact with the world in the future.

night. We cried and bonded with each other, trying to process the harshness of our situations as we were forced to confront realities normally so easy to avoid.

The common thread that has interwoven all of these experiences for me is people. In these travels I met so many remarkable women and men whose stories of struggle, whose local and global perspectives on their situation, and whose warmth and love continue to impel me to understand deeper and raise awareness further. The resilience of those displaced peoples in the US as they fight the odds—and the mindsets—of what it means to be homeless in this country was most impressive. It took the tears of joy and laughter spurred by those who have the least reason to laugh, but continue to do so ceaselessly while fighting for their human dignity, to put my confusion in order. My time is not remembered by how much I did for people in Brazil, for I was the one they have done so much for. People like Jandyra, a lady living in Nova Laranjiras where I stayed, have amazed me with their resiliency and love of life. Living in a rural farming cooperative where male dominance is the norm, she serves as the representative of the farm and an ardent defender of gender equality. My values and goals have undergone revisions and I have been educated in the skills of living. Life is found in the struggle, the victory matters not. Living each moment full of the passion of life, all else becomes justified. It was not an easy time, but I loved every minute of it. I will forever be indebted to all the wonderfully real people whom I came into contact with on my journey.

seems so fitting in retrospect. The tears of frustration and fear and loneliness in Boston created deep uneasiness in me about the human condition. It took the tears of joy and laughter spurred by those who have the least reason to laugh, but continue to do so ceaselessly while fighting for their human dignity, to put my confusion in order. My time is not remembered by how much I did for people in Brazil, for I was the one they have done so much for. People like Jandyra, a lady living in Nova Laranjiras where I stayed, have amazed me with their resiliency and love of life. Living in a rural farming cooperative where male dominance is the norm, she serves as the representative of the farm and an ardent defender of gender equality. My values and goals have undergone revisions and I have been educated in the skills of living. Life is found in the struggle, the victory matters not. Living each moment full of the passion of life, all else becomes justified. It was not an easy time, but I loved every minute of it. I will forever be indebted to all the wonderfully real people whom I came into contact with on my journey.