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Personal Essay  
English 101  
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September 29, 2005

### The Youth Group Mission

I was put into a group with ten other high school students that I didn't know very well. This group, which christened itself "God's Army," would build a twelve by twenty-four foot house for a family in Tijuana. "God's Army" was one of the fifteen housing groups that had made the trip from First Holy Church in Spokane to Tijuana, Mexico during the spring break of 2004. The trip is an annual tradition for the First Holy Youth Group.

It began at the Spokane airport a couple days after school had let out for spring break. I stood with my older sister, Sarah, and my Dad while we waited, with hundreds of other church families, to check our bags and board a late morning flight departing for San Diego. My Dad seemed more excited than any of the teenagers as he smiled and joked with Sarah and I. At the security gates, he hugged us both and departed with the rest of the parents.

Upon landing in San Diego, the entire group claimed their baggage and loaded onto a series of rented, white vans that were to carry us across the border. I watched the lights, buildings and people of the strange city as we moved through the palm tree lined streets. I imagined living in San Diego as one of the strangers outside my window or as a Tijuanan. I wondered what the Tijuuanans would think of us.

Despite a language and cultural barrier I firmly believed that human rationality and emotion unites all people. This was the basis of my desire to not disrespect any

person I would meet in Tijuana by assuming I am superior because I had the ability to help them and they were in need. But most of all, I did not want to seem like a tourist. Perhaps a few others had these ideas in mind as well because I was not alone when I cringed at the untimely tactlessness of the five giggling girls crammed on the backseat; they covered their noses as we drove into Tijuana and asked loudly, “Oh my god! What is that smell.”

I watched the landscape of Tijuana as it passed the van window. It seemed barren even though the dirt streets were lined with small, faceless concrete buildings, or decrepit shacks and houses. I could see a giant arch towering out of obviously the more developed side of town with a banner stretched across it which bore the message “Bienvenidos a Tijuana.” Only a few stragglers walked the streets at this hour in the night. We passed them quickly, following a dirt road to an orphanage where we would stay.

The caravan line entered through an opened gate and crowded the driveway of the orphanage which was a group of old buildings fenced around a courtyard on a dirt street across from a bakery, a few other junk stores, and some houses. In daylight, I learned that the sewage from these various buildings ran out through pipes into the dirt outside, creating a small slow stream in the middle of the road and the constant sewage smell that seems to be characteristic of much of Tijuana.

The children who lived at the orphanage were careful to avoid the water while playing games around the street. They invited us to play too, despite the language barrier, and befriended or accepted us as role models instantly. I did not feel worthy of this adoration from children who would live in poorer conditions than myself and receive

few, if any opportunities in their futures all because they were born in Mexico. It seemed to me that the kids should be angry with us.

The second day after our arrival, each housing group was taken to their building sites in a van full of supplies and introduced to the families that were selected for the housing project. The family our housing group was assigned to was relatively small; a younger married couple with one baby less than a year old. The mother of the family seemed shy but greeted us kindly. The father smiled and vigorously shook our leaders' hands. The property that the family owned was a bit larger than a square with 24 ft. sides and was on the step of a bulldozed, tiered dirt valley.

The house would have a concrete foundation, glass windows, a locking door and electricity. The finished product would be much unlike the other sixty or seventy forts that lined the manmade dirt valley and were built from whatever could be found like a bird's nest created with garbage. The steps for building our house from the leveling step to the windows, doors, and electrical wiring step spanned the days of our week long stay. The wife and husband helped whenever they could and would pray for us before we started building each day. The neighbor kids would help paint until we packed up and left in the evening for dinner and worship.

When the houses were finished, the keys were ceremoniously handed to the family members; most of the adults receiving their keys wept, but tried to hide it. Our mission was completed when made our trip to the luxurious La Jolla, California to stay the last night before our flight out the next morning.

We were housed in a cathedral complete with expertly landscaped courtyards, and beautiful antiques. I pretended like these surroundings were no more comfortable than the

ones we had just come from but truly, I was mesmerized by the beauty of the church and its city and its city's beach. I did not enjoy the place for long, however. The entire group was packed into a large, windowless Sunday school classroom to participate in another tradition that was nicknamed "cry night."

Cry night started when any student who wished to was asked to explain to the youth group how the trip has changed them. It started slow; the individuals that decided to speak were brief. Many said that they had never imagined such poverty and the extreme difference it was from their own suburban communities, but the pace picked up when one after the other admitted to eating disorders, suicide attempts, and drug addictions brought on by a desire to fit in or to fill the gap where God wasn't or perhaps just to have an identity of some sort. Some cried while they confessed real sins or traumatic experiences and some cried while they imagined sins or experiences to confess to.

It seemed as if the desire to admit to some issue and then be transformed into a youth group success story poster person was as contagious as hepatitis among intravenous drug abusers. I desperately wanted to leave and save myself or kill this strange virus by standing up and scolding everyone. I wanted to scold the other teenagers who complained about their lives for their ungraciousness after meeting the people in Tijuana who had real, dire needs but would still have too much dignity to be caught in this mob act. I wanted to scold the adults not only for supporting cry night but for acting as obvious catalysts. I wondered if this was the true motive for our long journey.

I did not say anything at cry night and I did not speak on the topic of what I learned from the Easter Project Trip until weeks later when each housing group was

asked to present their illuminations along with a summary of our favorite memories to the parents and church enthusiasts who had helped pay our way. At this meeting, I told my parents, and everybody else's, that despite deprivation of basic needs, many of the people in Tijuana are happier, more complete, and stronger people than those who have only less important matters to worry about.