



Primeros  
Pasos

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## VOLUNTEERING AT PRIMEROS PASOS

*Experiences of a University Internship Group*



*GlobeMed  
University of Georgetown GROW Team  
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<http://www.globemed.org/impact/georgetown/>

# BECOMING A VOLUNTEER

## *How we prepared to join the Primeros Pasos team*

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### Contacting the Clinic

GlobeMed at Georgetown has been partnered with Primeros Pasos for years, and each year a group of three chapter members travels to Guatemala to evaluate and build upon the partnership that exists between the two organizations. This summer was the first under the new administration of Primeros Pasos, and as such communication was crucial in the months prior to arrival. Jamie de Guzmán Pet, the Volunteer Coordinator, who is also the current General Director and Development Director of the clinic, was more than helpful in acquainting us with the functions and daily itinerary of Primeros Pasos, and actively communicated with our team to design a role that would best utilize our talents as well as advance the mission of the clinic. Through a combination of emails, video and voice calls, we were able to have our questions answered and concerns addressed before ever stepping foot on a plane, which gave us a strong sense of direction and support as we planned for and embarked on our journey.



In addition to learning about Primeros Pasos as an organization, we took the weeks before arriving to research the communities of the Palajunoj Valley, which are the main beneficiaries of the clinic's services. Having knowledge of the rich culture and geographical backdrop of the area surrounding Quetzaltenango was not only fascinating to learn, but critical to understanding the clinic's role in the greater community in which it exists and the people that it serves.



## “First Steps”

Primeros Pasos, or “first steps” as its name translates, is unique in that it offers individuals with a wide range of talents the opportunity to contribute to a project without the restrictive requirements that often accompany volunteer positions. As three undergraduate students with no degrees and minimal travel experience, we feared that our participation would not be highly valued, but this was not the case at Primeros Pasos. With interests that ranged from computer science to medicine, engineering, and marketing, the team of volunteers during summer of 2014 all contributed their individual talents to create a cohesive, highly productive unit. Moreover, we were able to not only work closely but also form strong relationships with Guatemalan staff, Guatemalan medical and dental students as well as other foreign volunteers! With the guidance of program directors, volunteer teams undertook a variety of tasks and projects, such as:

1. Building upon an existing curriculum to make it more interactive for students through the creation of PowerPoints presentations, activity sheets, and teacher guides for the Healthy Schools Program.

2. Improving the sustainability and consistency of the Healthy Schools Program by storing materials and procedural guidelines in a Dropbox where it can be accessed year after year by new volunteers.
3. Working towards the implementation of an open medical records system, which would allow for tracking and monitoring of patient history and progress over time, even without reliable internet connection.
4. Collaborating with local schools to administer mobile clinics for over 4,000 children in the Palajunoj Valley. These entail weighing and measuring each class, collecting fecal samples for testing, and giving free medical and dental check-ups to each child in a school setting.
5. Evaluating the effectiveness of the Nutrition Program by administering oral surveys in Spanish to mothers who have participated in the program's lessons and demonstrations.
6. Repairing and enhancing the physical structure of the clinic by constructing a hand-washing station, planting a garden, and painting murals.



## Living in Xela

Quetzaltenango, or as commonly referred to as Xela, exposes volunteers to a rich fusion of traditional and urban culture. Working at Primeros Pasos, which serves rural populations, allows individuals to witness and learn more about the different traditional customs of Guatemalans, within the different divisions. It is specifically in Xela, Zone 1 that one is exposed to an urbanized setting and can find amusement through an array activities such as of salsa nightclubs. Apart from finding diversion in Xela, because of its relative distance to top touristic locations, one can take advantage of weekend travel to several other cities in Guatemala. With enough time and *Primeros Pasos Volunteer Experience*

effort, one can certainly find cost effective ways to visit top attraction areas. In addition, while volunteering at Primeros Pasos friendships with other volunteers bloomed and made for great joint weekend travel.

“Living in Xela is the best of both worlds, with the comforts of a modern city and the landscape of an ancient paradise”- Nicole Conrad

One of the best parts of living in Xela is interacting and sharing a common space with residents of Xela, who we have come to view as one of the most empathetic of people. Most of learning about Xela and beginning to feel a sense of comfort with living there is meeting the people who make Xela what it is. Upon arrival, the amicable attitude and openness of individuals in Xela, is evident if not undeniable. It is through day-to-day conversations with people in “Chicken Busses” that you will naturally come to realize this and consequently learn more about Guatemalan mannerisms, culture, and most importantly history. Make sure to take advantage of everything Xela has to offer!



## Your Xela “Bucket List”

- ✓ Watch the Sunset/ Sunrise at one of the following volcanoes: Santa Maria, Tajumulco, Volcan Atitlan, Volcan de Agua or Volcan Tacàna
  - ✓ Take a discounted tour with Quetzaltrekkers Hiking Company
    - ✓ Take a free Salsa dance class at “La Parranda”
    - ✓ Visit “Las Fuentes Gorginas”
- ✓ Take a tour to Xela’s historic monuments: Minerva Temple & Tecun Statue
  - ✓ Visit Antigua
  - ✓ Visit Lake Atitlan
  - ✓ Visit Chichicastenango



## Expectations Shattered

Prior to visiting, it's fairly simple to hold a rigid, preconceived notion of Guatemala. More often than not, this image consists of Guatemala as an almost exclusively destitute, poorly governed nation running rampant with crime and disease. Although in an ideal world this wouldn't be the case, it's understandable! Almost as easily as we make the analogy between pizza and deliciousness, we've often been socialized to associate low and middle income countries with poverty and illness. While the case may be that many developing nations face these issues, it's critical to not dehumanize millions of people by solely taking shortcomings into consideration and not realizing that despite a plethora of differences, we are more similar than we think! This should be at the forefront of our thinking pre-, during, and post-Guatemala. It's now your duty to take ownership of any ignorance and debunk misconceptions you and friends or family may have.

“How will I begin adopting this mindset?” you ask? Well, fret not, incoming volunteers! For from the moment you begin your journey at Primeros Pasos, the staff does an excellent job at helping one reach this method of thinking. To further guide you along this process of decolonization, we have made a list of “Dos and Don'ts!”

### Dos and Don'ts of Expunging Preconceived Notions

- ✓ **DO** get to know locals by chatting with fellow passengers on the chicken bus, the employees at your many local *tiendas*, and the patients that visit Primeros Pasos!
  
- X **DON'T** fall into the trap of believing you're some sort of savior for the residents of Palujonj Valley.
  - ✓ **DO** remember that you're here to help the clinic in ways you can, but also know when you're crossing the line by being culturally insensitive or stepping out of your scope of knowledge!
  
- X **DON'T** first look at a person and become fixated by his/her struggles and shortcomings.
  - ✓ **DO** instead taking into account talents and other positive aspects!
  
- X **DON'T** be afraid of taking advantage of Guatemala because of stories or myths you've encountered.
  - ✓ **DO** visit as many neighborhoods in Palajunoj Valley, cities, and landmarks as possible. No better way than to get to know the real Guatemala than by exploring! Of course, as with anywhere in the world, do take necessary precautions, such as neither carrying wads of Quetzales down the block nor walking alone at 2AM.
  
- X **DON'T** arrive believing Guatemala is composed of a homogenous culture, people, and ideals.
  - ✓ **DO** utilize the wonder that is the Google search engine and research Guatemala's culture, interesting history, and multitude of ethnicities prior to landing!
  
- X **DON'T** always think your way is the right way. Everyone's unique experiences and perspectives provide him/her with different viable approaches and solutions to problems, and it's crucial to recognize that.
  - ✓ Most importantly, **DO** remember that this will be an unforgettable experience—one of mutual learning, respect, and gratitude.

*Thank you from the GlobeMed University of Georgetown GROW Team and the Primeros Pasos Family!*

