



**Mark Chapman Scholars Program Study Abroad Essay  
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I am not sure where to begin my story about my trip abroad this summer. My arrival to Belize was not without complications. First of all, it was determined that my oversized suitcase that contained 250 pairs of donated eye glasses was too heavy by airline standards. Secondly, my flight was cancelled and rescheduled for the next day after my parents had already left me at the airport and returned home to Salina from Wichita, KS ninety miles away. I can look back at it now and laugh, but at the time it was very stressful trying to get on a shuttle with my huge suitcase with all those eye glasses and make my way to the motel the airline had arranged for me for the night until my flight out the next morning all by myself. However, this would only be a precursor to what I would be doing all by myself during this adventure. The movie of my time in Belize really begins with me walking in the market of Punta Gorda my first day. It would be my first taste of Belizean culture.

I see all these villagers hawking their produce. I am overwhelmed by it all. I pick up different fruits and vegetables but am not sure what I have or what they cost. I finally ask what different items are and how they should be prepared or cooked. The answer was always the same no matter where I went or whom I asked. "Just put it in the soup." I did not know what the soup was or where I would find it, but I would have eight weeks to untangle that mystery.

My first two weeks of this adventure were well . . . less than smooth. Many things that I thought were going to happen did not, and several things that I did not plan on did. Consequently, one of the biggest lessons I learned was to "expect the unexpected." In a developing country, one has to be flexible or failure is guaranteed. For instance, being a pre-optometry student, I had planned on working with a seasoned optometrist in the remote villages of Punta Gorda when Hillside International Health Care Clinic conducted mobile clinics. However, that strategy quickly faded when the optometrist had to relocate to Belize City, six hours away. Another objective of my

study abroad was to provide spiritual outreach working alongside the Jesuit priests stationed there in Punta Gorda. However, that plan evaporated quickly too. With no warning, the Jesuit priests were reassigned. The two big components of my "adventure of a lifetime" were in complete disarray, and I felt frustrated. What was I going to do? Everything I thought was in place had gone belly up! Moreover, I still had six weeks to go. However, that is where my adventure and my personal story of growth really begin. After all I had planned this DIY (do it yourself) mission trip and now I would have to go to Plan B and salvage it myself. There was no one to fix it but me.

The one thing about this trip that did go right from the very beginning was my association with Hillside International Health Care Clinic. Right away they got me settled and introduced me to the clinic staff, walked me through their protocol and schedule. I was very fortunate to work with medical students from the United Kingdom (UK), New Zealand, and the United States. I was introduced to pharmacy, physical therapy, and medical treatments. Initially, I felt intimidated by the medical student's abilities and skills. After all, they had much more experience and exposure to the medical field than I did. Then something happened that changed my whole perspective regarding this journey and, to a certain extent, my life. One of the doctors from the UK told me that being a good physician is more than knowledge. He told me that it is 80/20 - 80% communication and 20% skills and knowledge. Then the UK doctor told me that I had the communication part down and that I would learn the other 20% (skills and knowledge) over time. That was the turning point for me. I realized that he was right. I began to reflect on what he had said and decided to put his advice into action. Over the course of the next six weeks, I did things that I never dreamed of doing! I took patient histories and conducted exams with their (doctor's) guidance. I assisted in wound management, gave fluoride treatments, and even performed a pap smear! I learned that language barriers could have a profound effect on the quality of care one provides. I was very excited at the prospect of taking my first patient medical history. I knew all the questions I was suppose to ask. While taking my first patient medical history, I inquired if they were passing 'stools' satisfactorily and they nodded yes assuredly. After a few more questions and receiving

alternating answers of yes then no, I could see a pattern. I rephrased the 'stool' question again and asked if they were 'pooping' okay? They looked at me and said, "No." Then it dawned on me that they did not understand English. Note to myself: determine if we speak the same language before starting an interview. Lesson learned!

As time progressed, my confidence soared, and quite unexpectedly, my career aspirations soared too. I am now contemplating and discerning whether I might pursue a medical degree instead of an optometry degree. Only time will tell which path I will take, but I am certainly open to the possibilities.

In hindsight, what I originally thought was a deal breaker actually turned into a better learning opportunity for me. I was so disappointed and frustrated when I found out that the optometrist had been transferred to Belize City and would not be available for me to shadow. However, because of his absence, I got to conduct actual visual acuity exams, screen for diabetes, and administer eye drops all by myself. There was a need, and I was more than willing. And the "hands on" experience was priceless! This was an excellent example of how medical professionals with limited resources adjust in their practices. The optometrist was not available but patients still received services from paraprofessionals and students-in-training (like me).

My desire to provide spiritual outreach seemed doomed as I indicated above, but again Plan B presented itself and the power of communication manifested itself just as the UK doctor advised me. As I worked in the clinic, I realized that we were seeing many orphaned children from a children's home (Laughing Out Loud [LOL] Children's Home). Fast forward and after visiting with the director, I secured an interview and soon I was tutoring the students in English two days a week and fulfilling that spiritual part of me by serving others.

Hillside International Health Care Clinic's motto of "Learning by Serving" definitely resonated with me. I particularly enjoyed going on mobile overnight clinics. In the remote villages, I was able to see up close and personal the impact that Hillside makes. In developing countries like Belize, one never knows what one will see. According to Hillside International the top

categories of health issues range from diseases of poverty to visual and dental problems. I remember how touched I was when a family invited me to eat with them. I walked into their thatched home with dirt floors and saw thirteen hammocks hanging and felt overwhelmed with gratitude for their generosity, even in the midst of extreme poverty. They shared their food and their song and dance with me, a total stranger, and asked for nothing in return. I was also moved to see a poor man showing genuine compassion and love to another person in worse conditions than his own. It was an amazing study of the human spirit to see an impoverished person taking care of an even more impoverished person. I will never forget that stay or the sights and sounds of the villagers.

Belize is a country of raw beauty. On the weekends, I traveled with the other medical students and explored the countryside as well as the neighboring country of Guatemala. I explored the Mayan ruins, the caves, the cayes, and the second largest barrier reef in the world. I hiked, snorkeled, fished, caved, swam, kayaked, and simply relaxed after working all week in the clinic and children's home. It is interesting to note that tourism is becoming one of the newest industries for the working poor.

Any discussion of my summer experience would not be complete without me elaborating on what I learned about myself. I learned to face down my fears about many things. I jumped off a cliff. I communicated to others of a different language and lifestyle. I survived without air conditioning, hot water, and internet. I figured out the money system. I now know there is a difference between "rice and beans" and "beans and rice." I realized that trying to get a visa could be tricky and scary if you do not use the right terminology. I made the mistake of saying I was "volunteering" with Hillside International instead of saying I was "working" with them. That mistake led to being interrogated by immigration officials for a period of time. However, I survived it all and walked away a more focused and confident person. I came home and had to readjust to my life. I have to admit that I had feelings of guilt because I have so much while many of the people I took care of have very little. On

the other hand, I realize that I can make a difference in the world. I will use my talents in service to others. It is my calling and passion.

While there were many notable moments during this eight-week journey, my biggest epiphany goes back to the market where I started my adventure that first day. My movie about Punta Gorda would end with the final scene back at the market. I would be strolling through the market saying my goodbyes to this very diverse country of many languages and villagers, experiences, and stories that I grew to love with the simple parting line "I sampled the soup and it was **so good!**"

Then the movie credits would scroll up. They would include my genuine and heartfelt gratitude to Ms. Cheryl Mellenthin and the Mark Chapman Scholars Program for the opportunity. I am humbled by their generosity. I was looking for a summer adventure that would challenge, develop, and inspire me. My trip to Punta Gorda, Belize definitely advanced my quest to achieve my "to be" list of proudly wearing the titles of volunteer, missionary and optometrist /medical doctor one day. "I did it all" because of the funding provided by Ms. Cheryl Mellenthin and the Mark Chapman Scholars Program through Kansas State University. I am forever grateful. Go CATS!

Video Attached: Mark Chapman Scholars Program Video