

The warm welcome I received curbside at the airport from Ms. Gerla and Moses (two employees of Liberty Children’s Home) immediately put me at ease and reassured me that my time in Belize would be well spent.



At the beginning of the week, we had 44 kids and eight volunteers living at the compound. The children at the home came from varied backgrounds—some were escaping abusive homes and others were only there till their parents/guardians are ready to take them back. However, a majority of them have lived at the home for many years.

When I arrived at Liberty, my business casual outfit quickly made me feel overdressed as kids scurried around me on the playground. After placing my luggage in the volunteer dorm, I met Trevor—a 19-year-old volunteer from Raleigh,

NC rapidly approaching his fifth week at Liberty. As we walked into the dining hall, Trevor explained how things worked at Liberty and detailed his experiences so far in Belize. As we exchanged stories, I could feel the eyes of the children watching me as they took their seats in the cafeteria.



After lunch and meeting the other volunteers, a few of the children raced up to me to ask my name and inquire about my background. Many Belizeans are dark-skinned so the kids weren't sure what to think when they met me. I honestly did not expect the kids to be so friendly and outgoing. They came up to me speaking in Creole—a common language in Belize. Since Creole is similar to English, I was able to understand some of what they said and explained to them that I was a volunteer from America. After satisfying their curiosity, I retired to my room and met two of

the other volunteers also living in the dorm. Lance is a 17-year old high school senior from Maryland and my roommate for a week and a half at Liberty. Beth, the other volunteer at the dorm, is a 20 year old from England. Later that day, I was invited to play world cup—a variation on soccer—with Trevor, Lance and the older boys. The boys ranged from age to 14 to 17 and reminded me of myself at that age; therefore, I found it easy to connect with them. The boys were very eager to play and extremely friendly. I later learned from Ms. Agatha—Liberty’s director—that the home usually doesn’t have many male volunteers and it was rare for three young men to be there at one time. The boys were extremely excited and full of energy. After 30 minutes of soccer, they wanted to play basketball on the Liberty court.



The boys often played without shoes and they encouraged me to do the same. Five minutes into the game, my feet were blistered and paining. However, I kept playing, doing my best to avoid the tiny rocks on the court. Twenty-one points later, the boys had demolished us in basketball and my feet screamed with pain. Despite the discomfort, I stuck around for two more games and had a blast with the boys. Soon enough, evening basketball became our tradition and a way to bond. Over the next two weeks, we exchanged cultural views on music and life, rode bikes around the village and genuinely enjoyed each other's company

I woke up the next morning with the sun's rays piercing our window as it illuminated the room at 6 AM. As I gathered my bearings, I couldn't believe I was in Belize and would be spending the next 13 days there. The blistering heat and lack of air conditioning were reminders that this trip would be very different than anything I had previously experienced. After breakfast, the other volunteers and I helped wash the dishes and sweep up the dining hall. Once finished with the breakfast chores, Lance and I walked down the street to Choc's Grocery.



Choc or 'Uncle Choc' as we called him owns a small store in front of his home and sells goods to the community, most importantly, purified water. Lance and I would carry our empty gallon containers to fill them up at Choc's most mornings after breakfast. As a result, we got to know our uncle, his wife, and daughter well. He told us the story of his immigration to Belize, his integration into the society and views on what it meant to be a Belizean. Choc is of Mayan descent; however, he came to Belize as a child. He grew up speaking creole, considers himself, and is considered in the community a full-fledged Belizean. His story really connected with me, a first generation American, and made my daily trip to see him an exciting excursion.

The next couple of days at Liberty were pretty slow and involved me getting know the kids and helping out around the home. I quickly grew to love the younger kids. A little boy, who I'll call "Jay," is one of my favorite kids at Liberty. I met Jay when he approached me in the dining hall to ask me my name. I can distinctly remember him in his trademark faded orange shirt, khaki shorts and rubber flip flops. Belizean mosquitoes are merciless and bite indiscriminately—however, they had a special fascination with Jay. Unlike most of the other kids, Jay's entire person was covered in bites and he seemed to be always doused in calamine lotion. Aside from our time spent on the swings, one of my favorite memories with the seven year old occurred the day we were doing yard work at Liberty.

After the grass was cut and most of the work completed for the day, there was a wheelbarrow left outside. A barefooted Jay walked up to me and took my

hand as he proceeded to ask for my help in picking up nuts that fell from a nearby tree. The look of determination on his face was priceless and I felt obliged to help.

I pushed the wheelbarrow towards the tree as he struggled to rake the nuts into a pile. He eventually allowed me to assist him with raking and we gathered up the nuts and placed them into the wheelbarrow. Seven minutes later, we successfully cleared the nuts and had them in the wheelbarrow. As I proceeded to push the wheelbarrow, Jay jumped in front of me and grabbed the handles of the barrow. I insisted that he let me assist him, but he was adamant and began to push the wheelbarrow across the yard.

The reason this memory stands out for me is the unexpected industry and initiative of this young child. Moreover, it showed me how great of a kid he was and I struggled to understand why any parent wouldn't want a child like him. Though I built a special relationship with Jay, most of the children at Liberty were equally precious and made me wonder why they had to be at the home instead of with their families. These interactions also forced me to reflect on just how blessed I was to have great parents and a childhood full of love and support.

On my fourth day at Liberty, we began to build an office space in the preschool. Our efforts were spearheaded by Travis—a middle aged American man volunteering with his wife and teenage daughter at Liberty—and Mr. Wafi, one of the longstanding employees of Liberty.



The project lasted two days and required Lance and I to make several runs to Perez's Hardware store to pick up hammers, nails, and drill bits. At its conclusion, we had helped to create spaces in a backroom for the teachers to use as an office. Though our project was small, the staff really appreciated our efforts and it was great to give back to the home in a tangible way.

A few days later, I learned that six of the children would be leaving Liberty to live with their families. While it was nice that their home lives would be stable enough for them to return, it was clear that the kids were sad to leave. One of the teenage girls who was leaving sat me down with her group of friends and delivered the news to me. She was able to hold herself together for about ten minutes before the tears began to flow.

In order to cheer the kids up, we had a celebration on the evening before six of the children left to return to their family. The party was filled with laughter, dancing and musical chairs. After the girls performed their choreographed dance to a reggae song, they encouraged the volunteers to join in on musical chairs—which led to one of the funnier moments of the night.

Michelle, one of the older volunteers, began to really get into the game and scurried around the chairs to ensure she claimed her seat as the music stopped. When the game was down to four volunteers and things began to heat up, Michelle pulled the chair to herself, which led to Lance falling flat on his butt as the music stopped. After a brief moment of concern, the entire room erupted in laughter as Lance awkwardly smiled and rose to his feet. The next couple days were filled with Michelle apologizing to Lance and many references to the eventful night.

While this story is extremely silly, it represents the camaraderie that developed and nature of the relationship between the volunteers. I spent an incredible amount of time with my fellow volunteers and we became a small diverse family. We quickly got to know each other and learned how to work together for the benefit of the children. I grew especially close to Lance and we quickly found ourselves doing almost everything together. We would coordinate our chore schedules so that we could work together and spent many nights discussing life and our common goals.

Our off-campus adventures in Old Belize and at a local cave-tubing/zip lining company were definitely among the highlights of the trip and gave us a chance to explore Belize outside of Ladyville. On Saturday morning, a group of volunteers, Mr.



Wafi, and his two children all boarded the local bus as we headed to Old Belize—a small waterpark that the children had placed on their summer bucket list. The fact that the nine of us were able to navigate the bus routes, traverse the busy streets of Belize City, and all somehow fit on an old school bus, that was about thirty people over capacity, en route to our destination was nothing short of a miracle. Despite the hectic nature of our travel to Old Belize, our time there was extremely fun and relaxing.



We even witnessed a wedding happening only yards from us.



The following morning, Lance and I boarded a bus and rode through the Belizean countryside. Forty-five minutes later, we arrived at the forest where we rode ATVs through muddy trails and ziplined among the treetops for a few hours

before heading back to Liberty for the day.





One of my favorite things about Belize was the food. Yan Chen's Grocery Store was a pleasant surprise and had some of the best food I've ever had. Yan Chen is a middle-aged woman who runs a grocery store that doubles as a home with her parents and two young children. Also known as Ms. Anna, Yan Chen sells lunch and dinner from Mondays to Saturdays and is very popular in Ladyville.



Lance and I accidentally stumbled on Yan’s store when we discovered another popular restaurant—Big Mama’s Kitchen—was closed on Mondays. Yan Chen’s most similarly resembles Bojangles as she specializes in chicken dishes, primarily chicken sandwiches and fried chicken. After my first chicken sandwich at Yan’s, I was hooked. Lance and I made a daily effort to visit Yan and our bike rides to and from Yan’s quickly became a way for us to bond. The restaurant became so integral in our Belizean lifestyle that on his last day in Belize, Lance requested that all of the volunteers enjoy a last supper with him at Yan’s.



I began my last day in Belize by watching the beautiful sunrise at the rocky beach.



As the hours ticked till my flight, I became a bag of emotions. I truly had not expected to love Belize, my co-volunteers and the children so much. I remember wishing I had one more week with the kids and struggling to find a way to tell them I was leaving.

When I walked into the classroom during lessons with the younger kids, they quickly asked me why I was dressed up. I replied, "I'm going home." Though a part of me was excited to be back with my friends and family, a larger portion of my being was deeply saddened to be leaving. One of the young girls made me laugh and smile when she bluntly commented on how feminine my flower-patterned shirt

made me look before stating she'd miss me being at Liberty. I did my best to stay strong as I hugged each child in the room, taking special attention to say goodbye to my little man Jay. I could see the sadness in his eyes and did my best to cheer him up as I made my way through the room.

Another moment that stood out for me was when my favorite little girl, Kay, asked me if I would be coming back. Her simple question made me realize how difficult it would be to return to Liberty and solidified that after August 9, 2015, I may never see the kids ever again—a thought that was unbearable to handle. Despite the incredible emotion around departure day, a part of me was able to remain optimistic. I realized how fortunate and blessed I was to have had the experience and opportunity to interact with and learn from these incredible young Belizeans.

My two weeks at Liberty Children's Home were humbling and transformational. Despite their troubled pasts, the children were resilient, extremely outgoing and among the friendliest people I have ever met. I quickly grew to love the atmosphere, my fellow volunteers and especially the children. They were absolutely adorable and each day I entered my volunteer dorm wishing I could adopt some of them.

I truly enjoyed my summer and the Brody SEP played a large part in its success. I am extremely grateful to the Brody family and Foundation for their generosity and encouraging me to step out of my comfort zone in order to explore the world around me.