

Superheroes

“¿Cuántos años tienes?” I asked the little boy.

“Doce,” he replies. Confused, I ask his age again,

“¿Cuántos años tienes?”

“Doce,” Marcos mumbles. The translations pour in my head. I must have heard wrong, but from his body position, his eyes, and the tone of his voice, I know I am right. I can feel his embarrassment of admitting he is twelve years old although he looks as if he were four. My back begins to tickle from sweat, not from the one hundred percent humidity. When I traveled to the Dominican Republic to support Aprendiendo a Vivir (A foundation that supplies the materials and education to children with type 1 diabetes), I saw the effects of diabetes on children like Marcos.

I always wondered why some people have loads of opportunity while others struggle to survive. For that reason, my principle interests in volunteering were to alleviate my guilt, work with kids, and gain medical experience. However, my mindset quickly changed during the first training session. While my biggest problem was my ACT score, others are try to figure out how they will get today’s dose of insulin. Usually, I am the kind of person who feels sorry for myself whenever I hear a tragic story, but this time I took action.

After my year of training and fundraising, I worked in-country as a counselor for Campo Amigo, a summer camp engineered towards educating children with type 1 diabetes. During camp, I taught the volunteers of Aprendiendo A Vivir how to create camp activities. This allowed the volunteers to continue my work after I left. The theme of Campo Amigo was “sé tu héroe” (be your own hero). Throughout camp, I reinforced this theme with the children by making superhero masks out of construction paper and capes out of plastic bags. After they looked like superheroes on the outside, I showed them how to be superheroes on the inside. When I first gave José his insulin injections, he would look away. After I told him multiple times that he is a superhero and can have a new superpower, José gave himself his first injection.

At the end of the month, we returned to the place where I met Marcos. Instead of guilt, the children filled me with potential: for them and for me. Traveling has given me insight to the necessity in bettering international health care. It has given me a reason to attend college because the answer lies in more than handing out medication. The problems continue after I leave, so I need to learn how to make a sustainable impact. I look forward to educating people in developing countries about how to prevent and manage their diseases, with the hope that one day, everyone can be his or her own superhero.