

Beyond Volunteering

In our world, and most especially in the US, we value personal success and fulfillment. This seems like an excellent value, a wonderful goal to strive toward. Yet, what exactly is the metric we employ to measure personal success and fulfillment? The most common, generally unquestioned one, is money. If you make a lot of money, if you're able to live in a big house or even better two, if you take luxurious vacations and drive clearly superior cars, then you are successful and fulfilled. I might want to argue against that notion. But, what I can't argue against is that most people accept this criterion (even if they are not always willing to admit it) and strive for success and fulfillment by accumulating material wealth. This is why I am sometimes absolutely floored by the long-term volunteers at Shoulder to Shoulder in Honduras.



It is one thing to volunteer some time each week to do something you like that makes the world a kinder place to live in. It's laudable, and gives you a sense of contentment that you are doing what you can to help. It's an entirely different thing to sacrifice three months to a year of your life to live in a poverty stricken area of a developing country. Our volunteers do not have the amenities we all take for granted. They have no running or hot water, and have all thus mastered the art of taking cold "bucket showers." Electricity is off with such regularity that it seems we are without power at least as often as we have it. Internet is at best so weak that Facebook has become a distant memory. There are no malls, no movie theaters, and fast food is taking a plate of rice and beans and running down the street with it. Additionally, on occasion one has to confront the presence of a scorpion or a tarantula. They take all of this on, plus struggle to understand a culture and language that is not their own, with nothing more than a small stipend and little opportunity for career advancement. So why do they do it?



I guess that they are giving a “beyond” response. They considered the breadth of the world they live in, the distance between themselves and others, and chose to do something to shorten it. They experience something outside the limits of the life they were given. Most people would never consider it, or if they did consider it, would yield to their fears and it would never happen. But here’s the kicker. I search the faces of these volunteers. Oddly, what I think I see, what strikes me, is that they appear to be successful and fulfilled. They have found something, something very special, that most people never even look for. This is truly amazing.



What is also amazing is what they give. I see children flock around them. I see smiles and laughter as the children seek to please them by pronouncing their names in English.

- I see Thabi, from South Africa, gently instructing José on a computer lesson in Mathematics.
- I see Kate, recently graduated from Lehigh, teaching kindergarten students a song.
- I see Jessica, married to a Honduran and raising a family between two countries, tutoring Belen.
- I see Alex, my cousin from Colorado, kicking about a soccer ball with five or six third grade boys.



How incredibly important these moments! It can never be judged or measured, the worth of these relationships. Who knows just how drastic a young person’s life is altered for the good because of the simple kindness of someone who simply gives without expectation of recognition or reward? What wonderful things can blossom from such self-giving, unbiased service?

Though the world has already set the standards to measure and judge what accounts for success and fulfillment, though there is a drive to find the right career that gives you the comfort and ease of a high salary, we all might do well to consider how a few have discovered a secret to success and fulfillment that is elusive to most of the world.

To our volunteers – Thanks for going beyond!

