

Reflections of Honduras

As I walked into the airport terminal in Tegucigalpa, the capital city of Honduras, I felt like a character from a Woody Allen short story - magically transported from Miami, Florida into a Humphrey Bogart film. The place was tiny and bustling. The combination of sights, sounds and scents had my senses buzzing. From Tegucigalpa I flew by propeller plane to the coastal town of La Ceiba, where I would be spending the next two weeks as a volunteer for the Winrock Foundation working with CURLA, the local university, in exploring new marketing concepts for independent cheese producers.

I was recruited by Carmen Algeciras, who directs the program from Florida International University's Entrepreneurship Center. An extremely engaging individual, she emphasized the altruistic virtues of volunteering. She did not mention the chance that I would get out of it much more than I contribute, although I suspect she knew.

What I found in Honduras was contrast. The physical beauty of the country is not lessened by the poverty shacks on the sides of the road. Rather you get the sense that the families in those shacks are as close to nature as the mountains above them. I was not convinced that they understand or long for the life of the wealthy, although I am certain they would welcome a way to better feed their families, educate their children, and preserve their health.

Historically Honduras has been an exploited country. The infrastructure developed was limited only to the needs of certain dominating foreign corporations, and the industries established were created to support these same entities. Under these conditions the country has nonetheless had its share of entrepreneurs and industrial visionaries. However, more than what is already there, I was most impressed by the potential for growth. Under the proper leadership and with a strong and visionary plan, I genuinely believe that Honduras can be a shining light in Central America.

Before I discuss my thoughts on how Honduras can leap into the status of highly developed nation, allow me to share some samples of what I found to be the country's most valuable asset – its people.

I was picked up in Tegucigalpa and accompanied to La Ceiba by Hector Hernandez, the Winrock country manager for Honduras. Hector is gracious and intelligent, and he made every effort to assist me in acclimating to Honduras by sharing with me his insights and opinions. On my way home to Florida I passed back through Tegucigalpa, where Hector met me and, even though it was a Sunday, took me for a long ride outside the city so I could see the picturesque old world villages. Hector has excellent vision and a great understanding of the potential for Honduras.

During my time in La Ceiba I was escorted by Dr. Guillermo Valle, a very smart man who earned his PhD in Gainesville, Florida and returned to Honduras to contribute his skills in the agricultural sector. Guillermo served as my translator, and was gracious enough to extend his interpreting talents beyond language, helping me understand the culture and the people around me. I taught him a bit about marketing and, through his matter-of-fact approach to the challenges he confronts daily, he taught me a great deal about life.

Another national treasure is Rafael Carias. Rafael serves as director of the institute that hosted me during my stay. He was there to direct me, guide me, and assist me. His keen

understanding of the needs of the program and the importance of strong relations with local businesses demonstrated to me his leadership qualities. Rafael is extremely able, very sharp, and serves as a great example to the students he interacts with daily.

Rafael introduced me to many of La Ceiba's business leaders like Reynaldo and his son Nino, Edison and his daughter Monica, and others. Reynaldo is an old time industrialist with interests in many sectors. He is a brilliant businessman with a natural instinct for creating value. Edison is an entrepreneur, starting with a bakery and now owning a chain of restaurants. He is the President of the La Ceiba Chamber of Commerce and an inspiration to many aspiring entrepreneurs.

A personal highlight of my trip was meeting Abdullah, the owner of many of the city's hotels, as well as the magnificent newly built Quinta Real. Abdullah is a gutsy businessman and a visionary in his efforts to develop the Caribbean Sea shoreline. While I have great respect and admiration for Abdullah as a businessman, I was more taken by his humanity.

Abdullah is originally from Beit Jala, a Christian Palestinian town next to Bethlehem. He left in 1967 right after the Six Day War. I know Beit Jala well because I patrolled the city as an Israeli soldier. I was uncertain how Abdullah would take to this stranger who had served as a soldier in the town he still misses so dearly that he designed the crowns of his new hotel to remind him of Jerusalem. In what I was to learn was his typical gentle way, Abdullah focused on our shared experiences. He brought me to his home for dinner and we discussed politics all night, becoming convinced that if it were up to us peace would be achieved in a matter of moments over some hummus.

Honduras is full of life. The people are extremely bright, unassuming, eager to learn, and looking to better their lives. The path to be taken so that business may thrive includes:

- A better business-university partnership to provide a better trained workforce.
- The broader use of technologies for operational efficiencies, improved information, better customer service, enhanced logistics, and more advanced marketing options.
- The branding of the country and some of its premier products in markets determined to be most attractive for export.
- The initiation of government funded and internationally funded programs to assist companies in identifying export opportunities and training them to be able to implement global business transactions.
- The expansion of internal business operations through improved distribution channels, more formal business practices, and the extension of core products into additional customer offerings.
- The development of apparent opportunities like tourism in La Ceiba through government incentives to develop the coastline.

I found my visit to Honduras to be very gratifying and inspiring. I believe I made some friends for life. I am excited for them because I see tremendous opportunity for growth. I look forward to going back one day. Perhaps when I need my spirits lifted.