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Fellows Report from the Field

A year of service— the difference of a lifetime

2014-2015

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Arte en Ojo Joven

Watson Hartsoe

Most photographers who come into Chamelecón, San Pedro Sula, Honduras are there to document the latest gang killings, military police busts, or the general plight of a community whose social fabric has been ripped apart by gang violence and a lack of social services. At the center of these stigmatized images, local youth symbolize a complex set of political, social, and economic conditions that perpetuate systems impunity, inequality, and exclusion. These oversimplified images of violence deny youth the chance, from their own point of view, to contextualize, explain, and converse with the wider community about their daily experience of violence, their community, and the true nature of development.

I started Ojo Joven with a camera and the strong belief that community development and youth development are one in the same. Ojo Joven is a community media platform that seeks to capture and convey important aspects of everyday life, eliciting and disseminating experiences, stories, and perceptions, a mediated community conversation that shares insights, patterns, and priorities. Ojo Joven has trained 12 young people in technical photography to facilitate community oriented discussion and public advocacy strategies. They act as counselors, documentarians, conversation leaders, and advocates for positive social change in their community.

We have organized a series of street art stations throughout Chamelecón, displaying images that our discussion research methodology identified as capable of opening conversations of social value with other young people.

Background: Watson graduated from University of the South - Sewanee, Watson won a post-graduate Fulbright scholarship that took him to work in San Pedro Sula to carry out research on NGOs and youth development efforts there.

To present this work, we organized an art walk, *No Más Calles Rojas*, to the various stations that also acted as a protest against a wave of gang massacres that had been sweeping the community. Since the completion of *No Más Calles Rojas*, we have been building curriculum, raising funds, and developing the project model. The responsibilities of coordinating and organizing on the ground have been since October 2014 in the hands of a highly capable collective of Hondurans, *Artes sin Fronteras*.

We are launching a KickStarter campaign in early 2015 to fund post-production of a documentary about a Hip Hop collective, Warriors Crew, and to expand our counselors' skills to include documentary film, more rigorous research methodologies, and improved facilitation of community discussion.

Ojo Joven—Artes Sin Fronteras, Honduras
a nonprofit organization that facilitates community conversations from the perspective of youth



Learning to appreciate simple things: A Push Pop in Nicaragua

Kim Gordon

Allá, in the States, I tend to assume responsibility. I am the mentor, the big sister, the event coordinator. It has been both startling and liberating to realize that while living in Nicaragua, I will always rely more on others. My biggest assets are enthusiasm and curiosity; rolling with the awkwardness is part of the experience, something I have had to learn to embrace. Moving from a major U.S. city to the socioeconomic impoverishment of rural Nicaragua is a daily challenge to my habitual lifestyle and world view. The day I was dropped off in front of a little house, its red door welcoming me to the first day of my placement, a knot in my stomach tightened as I stood at the doorstep of my new home. There were no stores, markets, or cyber cafes in sight, in a world seemingly off the grid, and the realization dawned that I was to be the only English-speaking *gringa* in a 20-mile radius.

As my world spun upside down, children became my window into Nicaraguan life. My host siblings—Cris (12), Ashly (7), and Engyl (5)—quickly became my closest friends. We decorated a shared coloring book, took pictures of our work, sang songs in Spanish and English, danced, filmed our performances, and played games drawn from all four camps of knowledge: preschool, elementary school, middle school, and U.S. university life. Their limitless energy make my days both repetitive and comforting. The transition has been a challenge, but I have my *compañeritos* to guide me.



Background: Kim graduated from the University of Pennsylvania in 2014, B.S. systems engineering and B.A. Hispanic studies

picking coffee support their families on less than \$5 a day. Houses appear bare, with plastic lawn chairs for furniture and only rice and beans on the fire stoves. Large satellite discs on the rooftops bring blurry images to tiny TVs. Sometimes, I cannot help but think about all that these families do without. I wanted to give Ashly a birthday gift, but without upsetting any cultural or monetary norms in the process.

I decided to host a little party. On her birthday, I watched her eagerly sort through the contents of the small gift bag I had carefully arranged the night before. Her shiny red pants contrasted with her muddy *chinelas*, worn down by months of walking to school and endless cartwheels. Her hair was tightly braided and fastened back with the pink heart-shaped pin that I gave her soon after arriving. It was a simple but flashy pin that I always packed in my travels, but rarely used. From the bag, Ashly pulled out a small plastic crown and her smile widened. It was cheaply made and I saw that one side was nearly broken and already missing rhinestones; yet, it was perfect.

My heart melted. My instinct in that moment was to give her everything I could think of: a new hairbrush, books, crayons, music, games, dolls, toys I played with as a girl that she did not have, things I knew she would appreciate but might never have. Of course, indulging my impulse would alienate others and only affirm stereotypes about *gringos* and our handouts (a whole other topic).

Ashly has influenced me the most. She embodies lovely contradictions: reserved but expressive, shy but hyper, gentle but demanding. Most of all, she is sweet, and in many ways reminds me of a younger version of myself. Strange or not, we have a lot in common, I tell my sister over Skype. Ashly and I have bonded over (children's) music, (crayon) art, (friendship) bracelets, and (picture) books. We have become the best of friends, and whether she realizes it or not, she has helped me through more than one challenge. When I learned that Ashly's eighth birthday was approaching, I

Comunidad Connect, Nicaragua

a nonprofit organization whose programs across Nicaragua inspire communities to become actively involved in sustainable development

began to consider ways I could make that day special. I thought about other children and families in the community. Analyzing population and health data for the clinic and preparing for sustainable tourism trips, I make house visits regularly. Men with steady work



Plainly, people could be happy with what they have, and I saw that her lack of exposure to my world may be a good thing. Even so, Ashly's 8th birthday was a perfect excuse to spoil her in a way that was special, but without being too extravagant. What remained in the bag was a pink blouse (designated by her mother as a church-only shirt), bubbles for her cousin and two siblings, and a lollipop, a pink Push Pop, a U.S. novelty I had found one day in Matagalpa, the expatriate-friendly city two hours away. Ashly had never seen a Push Pop, nor had I since I was about her age. I removed the wrapper and showed her how she could push up the lollipop.

Ashly could not wait to try and begged her mother to let her begin pushing and licking. Permission granted, her focus fell on the Push Pop. But after just a few moments, she was ready to share. She passed the Push Pop along to her brother, her cousin, her other brother, her mother, her father, her uncle, and her aunt. Then she came to me. Ashly was kind, and she knew the value of sharing with her family. In fact, family was everything; Nicaraguans in the community did not trust in "friends" and it is a virtue to always come straight home after school to help out in the house and spend time with family members. Ashly knew that the Push Pop was something she might not see in her neighborhood again. She wanted to share with those closest to her.

I had bought her a little lollipop to spoil her (and only her) on her birthday. But how could I reject my best Nicaraguan friend? How could I refuse the little princess that she was? I was not inclined to share lollipops with eight other people, but I feared that if I said "no" she would give the dog a lick and then come back to ask me again. I decided not to take any chances. I held my breath and stuck my tongue out to taste the very edge of the Push Pop.

I was flustered by the thought of a germ-laden lollipop, but the afternoon was memorable and Ashly pranced around adorably as we called her *princesa*. I also had made her a vegan pudding for the little party, a mix of avocados, bananas, cocoa powder, and honey. As I sprinkled coconut flakes on top of the dessert, I bragged, *¿Saben qué?* There is no sugar! None!! But my family of five uses a pound of sugar or more to prepare coffee and fruit juice each day; this is simply how things work. My host family inspected my sugar-free pudding with interest and caution before taking a few bites. My host mom's mannerisms are always reserved, but even she gave a slight grin of what I took to be approval. Gifts and pudding, I thought: it was all a success.

I felt like a million bucks. If not an intercultural affair of the ages, Ashly's party was my chance to exert some control and independence, both rare in my new lifestyle. Sometimes, I feel trapped in a *telenovela* I cannot quite understand, but I have a Nicaraguan family. The children may laugh hysterically in my face when I mispronounce a Spanish word, but they are my friends. Ashly has taken an interest in me in a way that no one else has. Our daily conversations, reading sessions, and shared meals are reassuring, contrasting with some of the more difficult encounters in my new job and new home. Happily, a plain, pink Push Pop can teach us something about our cultures and ourselves.



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Dear Friends of PiLA,

This issue addresses the activities of a handful of our over 50 fellows currently serving across the region. As 2014 winds down, we call on you to **make a tax-deductible gift to support PiLA's mission**. A nonprofit 501(c)(3) organization, PiLA depends on the generosity of visionary individuals—like you—who share our commitment to positively impact life throughout the region. With your support, in 2015–2016 PiLA will continue to place fellows in year-long service posts across Latin America and the Caribbean. Please join the many generous individuals and organizations that support PiLA's critical work to match talented and motivated recent college graduates with NGOs that are grappling with the myriad cultural, social, economic, and political issues that impact the lives of people across the region. Your help is essential to make PiLA's work possible. Please also share this newsletter with family and friends!

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Cojolya Association of Maya Women Weavers

Katharine Sullivan

I work in the areas of communication and project management at the Cojolya Association of Maya Women Weavers. Most of the artisans that Cojolya supports speak only Tz'utujil (a Maya language), lack formal education, and face discrimination due to their status as rural, indigenous women. The goal of the association is to assist these women to use their skills, weaving beautiful textiles on the backstrap loom, to become breadwinners in their families and leaders in their community. To this end, we pay our artisans double what they would earn selling their wares in the local market, so they can invest in the health, security, and education of their families. We also provide materials and design services, and we market Cojolya products worldwide, so our artisans never have to worry about finding a buyer for their weavings. We also provide free professional development training on topics ranging from sewing machine techniques to business and communication skills. Finally, our social branch works to improve community health by installing sustainable cook stoves throughout the Lake Atitlán basin, to reduce health problems related to smoke inhalation caused by cooking over open flames, to cut down on the time families must spend hauling firewood, and thus to reduce environmental degradation.



There is no single typical workday, as I've been involved in several different project areas. Currently, my biggest responsibility is building up Cojolya's communications capacity, which includes creating its first annual reports, starting social media campaigns, and working with a web designer to build a contemporary website. These objectives will increase Cojolya's transparency; this will also help find buyers for Cojolya products and identify donors for our social programs. I also seek out partnerships with fair trade organizations and ethical textile designers in order to expand the market for Cojolya textiles. In the past several months, our artisans have seen their textiles incorporated into designers' collections in countries as far-flung as Canada and Hong Kong, which has required them to learn new dying, weaving, and sewing skills in the process.

Looking ahead, our team plans to conduct interviews with each artisan in order to better understand the situation and

motivations of our weavers, so Cojolya can better address their needs. We also want to share the many remarkable stories these artisans have to tell. One Cojolya weaver, María, has used the business and design training she received through Cojolya to open a shop selling the traditional articles of clothing worn by Maya women—blouses, wrap skirts, and shawls—that she designs in new and innovative patterns and color schemes. Her shop has been a resounding success among Santiago Atitlán's emerging middle class, allowing María to support her entire family, to improve her standard of living, to become a successful business owner and one of the first Maya fashion designers creating products for her fellow Maya women. Stories like María's illustrate how women can fight poverty when they have access to resources and skills training.

Background: Katie graduated from Washington University in St. Louis in 2013, where she double-majored in international studies and Spanish and minored in anthropology.



Cojolya Association, Guatemala

a nonprofit organization dedicated to the preservation of backstrap loom weaving and enabling Maya women weavers to make a living through their work



As I near the halfway mark of my PiLA fellowship, I am struck by how much the lakeside town of Santiago Atitlán feels like home. I live with a wonderful Tz'utujil Maya family that consistently looks out for me, invites me to family gatherings, and teaches me such all-important life skills as shaping and cooking tortillas. I play soccer with a group of local women, and my walk to work every morning engenders a stream of greetings and small exchanges with neighbors. Despite having lived in cities for the past five years, I've surprised myself by adjusting nicely to small village life and the sense of community it offers.

I've also gotten the chance to work as a volunteer English teacher with a wonderful organization called Starfish, which provides scholarships and comprehensive support to disadvantaged Maya girls so that they can finish school and enter university. Seeing the many challenges local young women face in obtaining an education, and the intensity with which they dedicate themselves to their studies when given the chance, has made me more aware of my own privilege and how comparatively easy it was for me to obtain a university education. Furthermore, working with Cojolya and Starfish has shown me how rural women can create positive change in their families and communities when given access to education and economic opportunity. During the next six months of my fellowship, I hope to continue learning and building relationships within the community of Santiago Atitlán.



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