

Princeton in Latin America May Newsletter

Report from the Field: Chris Breen Deloitte, Mexico City

As everyone may know, the novel H1N1 flu strain or “swine flu,” has greatly affected life in Mexico City. To those watching from abroad, the outbreak might have seemed like an overnight development. What you might not realize is that the 20 million residents of the city, including myself, were also caught off guard.

On the night of Thursday, April 23, I attended a small gathering at an expat friend’s apartment. While there, one of my friends who is a teacher got a phone call from a coworker letting her know that classes at all schools in the city had been canceled the next day because of the flu. (Naturally, her first instinct was to go clubbing that night.) For most people present, this was the first that they had heard of any issue with the flu. At Deloitte, we had received two emails during the week informing us of an unusually high number of seasonal flu cases in Mexico City for April and asking us to take precautions, but I did not sense any urgency.



Images of Mexico City before the H1N1 Flu Strain took over.



On Friday, the work day began relatively normally. However, as the day progressed, word spread that this was an entirely new strain of the flu. As news broke in Mexico, it was reported in real time by international media outlets like CNN and the Wall Street Journal, which made me begin to realize the significance of the outbreak. That evening, as I rode the metro home, I noticed an increased number of passengers wearing face masks, but only slightly more than most days. (There are always a few people riding the metro wearing masks.)

That weekend, I attended a coworker’s wedding on Saturday, which in retrospect might not have been the brightest idea. But given the number of guests in attendance—easily 600 people—it did not seem that many had been willing to pass up the 14 hour celebration. I spent most of Sunday in my apartment except for an unsuccessful trip to a few pharmacies in search of a face mask. My roommate had already left for the U.S. that morning under orders from his parents. In the evening, following PiLA’s advise, I decided with my parents to do the same.

It was Monday, though, that I really noticed a disruption in the normal flow of city life. Having been thoroughly warned by my parents, I took a cab to work instead of the metro. I allowed plenty of time for the usually bumper-to-bumper Mexico City traffic, but came across none. Schools were shuttered and had signs in the windows reading "No hay clases." Well over half of the people roaming the streets and in the cars we passed were wearing face masks. And I am willing to bet that a significant portion of the unmasked had tried, like I had, to buy a mask but had been unable to do so. In my building, I saw that the pharmacy had a make-shift, hand-written sign by the entrance saying "no tenemos cubrebocas ni gel," referring to hand sanitizer. Anyone with a supply of either could surely have made a killing selling them on the street.

The atmosphere at work was uncomfortable with people riding the elevators dressed more appropriately for a hospital than an office building. Most heeded the directions of the government and Deloitte management, forgoing the customary hand-shake or cheek-kiss greeting. A couple, however, insisted on acting as though all were normal and making everyone else squeamish. A few hours into the day, as if the flu scare were not enough, we experienced the first earthquake since my arrival in Mexico last July. Being in the city's tallest building (54 stories), I could definitely feel the swaying and shaking. It also provided a unique vantage point to see many of the surrounding buildings being evacuated.

In the afternoon, management informed us that, due to the severity of the flu outbreak in the city, we would be working from home until further notice. Fortunately, they were understanding and had no problem with my working from Massachusetts.

That night Kate Reid and her roommates held a small get-together so that those of us still there could say goodbye before most left the country indefinitely. Some were unsure if they would return. As I walked to the apartment, I could not help but notice that the usually bustling Condesa neighborhood was eerily quiet, with all of its bars and restaurants closed except for take-out service.

In the Mexico City airport and on my flight to Houston, everyone was wearing the surgical masks omnipresent throughout the city. While sold out in pharmacies around the city, the government had stockpiled the masks and stationed soldiers throughout the airport to distribute them. On the leg from Houston to Boston, I only eyed two other people donning the green facial covering. At this point I think it made people more uncomfortable than if I had been wearing nothing, but I felt that wearing the mask was the responsible thing to do on the off chance that I had contracted the flu and was contagious. Also, I guess I had caught some of the hysteria and paranoia sweeping Mexico City.

Back here in the U.S., reactions have been interesting to say the least. My parents decided to quarantine me for a couple days. At their places of work, it quickly became office gossip that their son had just returned from Mexico City. People panicked. My father actually worked from home one day after being told that his presence in the office made some people uncomfortable. Although a regrettable situation, I cannot blame people too much since the media did quite a job of stirring up excitement about the whole situation.

Now that things have calmed down in Mexico City, work in my office is set to resume on Monday, May 11. Not everything will be back to normal, though. Each morning, in order to gain entry into the office, all employees will be required to pass through a medical screening station per government order.

Report from the Field: Nathan Fabian Arias Foundation, Costa Rica

In the beginning of February myself and the another intern at the Arias Foundation, Thomas Powers from Quinnipiac University, got in touch with a public school near our foundation to see if we could start some type of after school program. We were expecting to do soccer or basketball, but apparently at this school there was a group of boys that really wanted to start an American Football team. It was not what we were expecting, but it seemed a means to accomplish all the goals we had set out with: creating free after school programming in a low-income area, promoting healthy lifestyles for youth, and providing a support system where participants could build strong relationships and interact with each other peacefully. So we went with it. While it has been very fun, we seriously lacked equipment. We only had one ball that I bought for the team and a few cones from the school.

So I emailed Georgetown Intramurals and my elementary school, Almaden Country School, to see if they would want to help out by donating some used equipment like flags, pennies, more footballs etc. They both got back to me within a few days and were really excited about the project! In fact word spread so fast at Georgetown that the office of the Provost wants to donate actual money to buy newer equipment, and the athletics department wants to donate shirts, as well as the used equipment from intramurals! They also want to cover the team in the school newspaper and online periodical. Further, the English newspaper in Costa Rica, The Tico Times, wants to do a story on the team! I am hoping La Nacion (San Jose's main paper) will follow.

Another important person in this story is the Colegio Mexico's PE teacher who has learned the game along with the boys and is now our third coach, who we are training to take over the team when we leave at the end of the year!

So that's where we are right now.



Above: Images of the new Team.

Right: Nathan with Colegio Mexico's PE teacher, intern Thomas Powers and the whole American Football Team!



Letter from the Director: Claire Brown

Dear Friends of PiLA,

We are excited to announce that we have placed our 2009-10 Fellows. This year, Fellows will be working with old and new partners, among them the Arias Foundation, Pro Mujer, the Amazon Conservation Association, IMIFAP, ProPeru, Funcedescr, and Endeavor and also WINGS Guatemala and Nica-HOPE. These organizations focus on topics ranging from malnutrition alleviation and public health to high impact entrepreneurship and natural resource conservation and all allow our Fellows the opportunity to learn about these topics in a hands-on and challenging environment. This class of Fellows is comprised of eight Princetonians and alumni from Georgetown, Amherst, Northwestern, and Barnard.

During Spring Break, three Princeton undergraduates, including 2009-10 Fellows Sasha Sadrai and Rosa Mendoza, traveled to Ensenada, Mexico, to work with the Arial Homes Project. There, they built several homes (see www.arialhome.org) and conducted several public health surveys, and shot a film of the whole process. Arial Homes is an organization founded by Tom Pirelli '69 and this trip was generously underwritten by him as well as several members of the Class of '68 and the Class of 1994, as this was '94's 15th Reunion Service Project. For more information, you may read Rosa's report, on our website: www.princeton.edu/~pila or view the video, at www.arialhome.org.

Finally, the annual PiLA Reunions Reception will be on the Friday of Reunions, May 29th, at 5:30pm in the Upper Hyphen of Chancellor Green. We hope to see many PiLA alumni and friends there!

All best,

Claire Brown
Executive Director

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Thank you for your continued support and interest in PiLA.