



U T A u s t i n

- Accepted College Essay -

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*"I do it for the joy it brings 'cause I'm a joyful girl. 'Cause the world owes us nothing, we owe each other the world."—Ani Difranco ("Joyful Girl")*

In the fall of my junior year, my mother announced that she had signed us up for a mission trip to Bolivia for Christmas break. My first thought was, "That's impossible! But I wanted a new computer and some new clothes. How will we ever get all the gifts down there? Our suitcases will be too heavy!" I was careful not to say these selfish things out loud. We—my mother, my three older siblings, and I—would be working as volunteers at the Amistad Mission in Cochubamba, Bolivia, a city of over two million people that none of us had ever heard of. Were we really going to spend Christmas working in an orphanage in one of the poorest countries in the world? For weeks leading up to the trip, I worried about what I would do there.

The minute we arrived at Amistad (the Friendship Mission), my fears dissolved. The children must have heard the grumbling engine and grinding of the bus tires on the gravel road, for as the primitive bus turned the corner, I could see no fewer than fifty sets of luminous, brown eyes welcoming us. Immediately sprinting toward us, one little girl, Naomi, leapt into my arms and kissed my face before even saying, "Hola!" Never before have I felt so welcomed by anyone—and these were complete strangers! Excited by our arrival, the children directed us to the community center, really a basketball court, which had been decorated with a Nativity scene made of crumpled manila paper. Dressed in tomato-red traditional Bolivian skirts, the teenagers narrated the Christmas Pageant as the younger children performed. Small native children were dressed as Mary, Joseph, Jesus, the three Wise Men, and the shepherds. The smallest girls pranced in full white dresses with masks made of cotton balls to make them look like sheep. Having obviously rehearsed for a long time, they proudly serenaded us with Christmas carols in Spanish, their joyous enthusiasm unbridled.

One day, I noticed a boy named Marcelo with a strange-looking apparatus of red plastic, rubber bands, and metal covering his face. My first response was to feel sorry for him: surely he was ashamed of his deformity and the need to wear this weird gizmo. But he came strolling up to the community center without a worry in the world, and as I approached to comfort him, he unleashed a huge smile inviting me to come outside to play soccer with him and his friends. No one else seemed to notice or even care about the brace installed to fix Marcelo's cleft palate.

The mission residences included ten houses, "casas," each housing a "family" of eight children, with a "mamà" and "tía" as caretakers. One afternoon I was invited to Casa San Francisco to eat lunch with one of the "familias." As guest of honor, I sat at the head of the long table with ten children sitting along each side. Over the wailing of the babies and bickering of the teenagers, the "tías" attempted to say grace. Next, they passed out plates of rice, each with cooked carrots, peas and a small piece of flavorless chicken. As I was served my plate, three-year old Maria spilled her apple juice all over my food. The ensuing silence told me that they expected me to be upset. Knowing not enough food was left in the pot to replenish my plate, Eduardo, the eldest boy, gallantly offered me his. When I refused, he switched the plates anyway. During my weeklong stay, I noticed acts of generosity and kindness both large and small. These people had few material possessions to give, but during my week there, I received gifts beyond the tangible and became very attached to all of the children at the Mission.

Working hard from sunup to sundown was not exactly my original idea of how to spend my coveted Christmas holiday, but the week I spent working side by side with my family remains one of the best experiences of my life. We arranged activities for the kids—arts and crafts, trips to the park, and sports games. On Christmas day, when we helped the Amistad children host a fun-filled party for families living in dire conditions just beyond the Mission fence, our guests were overjoyed. The faces of both parents and children lit up as I handed each of them one simple present; filled with an appreciation for such simple things, these children deserved so much more, yet they were happy with what they had.

Not until several weeks after our return did I realize, "Hey, I didn't get that computer I had wanted so much, nor the new jeans." At the same time, I realized that I might have missed it all had I not gone on our Bolivia trip. The gifts I received last December from the orphaned children of Amistad added not a single pound to the luggage I carried home, for the lasting gifts they gave me were those of joy, of friendship, of growing up.

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