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### The Trip of a Lifetime

“A journey of a thousand miles must begin with a single step.”<sup>1</sup>

Traveling to different parts of the United States and other countries has been, and will always be, a big part of my life. Before every trip that I had taken, there were so many emotions running through my head, I could barely stand the eagerness my heart felt. Restless, as if tomorrow were an eternity away, I lay on my satin sheets staring at the glowing stars on my ceiling. My eyes opened every twenty minutes thinking hours had gone by.

Turning over in my bed from side to side I wondered...

“Will tomorrow ever come?”

It was 4:00 am when I opened my eyes. The fact I had only slept for about four hours hadn't even crossed my mind. I tip-toed down the steps. After eating a chocolate chip muffin, packing the last of my valuables and clunking my suitcase over the stamped-tile floor to the front door, I was finally ready! As the limo crept up to my house with other families already sitting behind the perfectly clear tinted windows, I got a chill throughout my body. The hair on my arms stood high. A smile emerged on my face. I felt like I was a little kid who was waiting to go to Disney World for the first time. The entire ride I could not stop thinking about Dominican Republic and what to expect of it.

“Did the people there live like we do here?” That can't be, I thought.

We sped through airport customs and finally boarded Continental Airlines. The pilots and flight attendants prepared the cabin for takeoff.

“In case of emergency, oxygen containers will drop from the overhead compartments...” were the faded words spoken from the attendant's mouth. However, I only concentrated on the exhilarating rush as the plane screamed down the runway. We were flying with the birds. All my worries were gone, up in the sky with only clouds

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<sup>1</sup> Lao Tzu, Brainy Quote (New York Times, 2000).

surrounding me. I knew in approximately three hours I would be running my fingers through aqua-blue ocean water and sipping on fruity drinks. We landed, and the adventure began.

The first day, all of the neighborhood families and the kids went scuba diving. One of the younger boys said he saw a shark. I didn't even want to know if that was true because I think I would have panicked. The second day, my family decided to do our own thing. My dad made appointments to get massages on the beach. Just imagine: lying in a secluded hut while the sun was just starting to peek over the horizon. The humidity was still low, so the temperature was perfect. Life was perfect.

The next day, the crew thought it was time to take a plantation tour. We rented jeeps that had chipped paint and rotten wheels. I did not even think the cars would run. However, once we got them up and going, they carried us steadfastly on our journey into the sugarcane fields. The workers looked extremely hot and worn down. They hardly cracked a smile through the sweat dripping down their sun tanned faces. Once we got to the village, though, the gloomy spirit disappeared amid the community of vibrant women and children. We parked our jeeps and walked up to the thatched hut. There were chairs waiting for us so the villagers could show us how they made their food and how the sugarcane was cut and used. As soon as we sat, the leading woman screamed to her son, "Take the machete and chop it down!" Her scratchy voice reverberated across the field. At that moment, her son came scurrying through the stalks swinging his machete. He looked too small to be carrying one of those long, sharp knives, but apparently he had been cutting sugarcane since the age of four. We each tasted the cane. It was incredibly sugary and juicy. The woman explained that the villagers used this cane to sweeten their food.

There was a contraption in the corner of the thatched hut that looked like it was hand-made. After pondering for about five minutes over what it could possibly be, I decided to ask one of the women. She explained to me how they used it to crack coconuts to get the milk out. Since much of the water in Dominican Republic was not drinkable, they said it was easier to drink coconut milk for its nutritious value. One of the husbandmen used thick papyrus leaves to strap pieces of wood together along with another object I could not quite make out.

After being in the village for an hour or so I realized how none of the children were in school. The boys hauled loads of sugarcane in a four-wheeled carriage. The girls were washing clothes, tidying up the hut and doing other chores. I then grasped the idea that many of these children did not go to school because their help was needed raising other family members and taking care of those everyday chores. The happy feeling I had in my heart gradually diminished because I felt so sorry for the kids. They were never going to have the chance to experience school. They would most likely never learn to read or write or have the opportunity to play on playgrounds with hundreds of kids their age. They would not learn their math times tables or memorize the presidents of the United States in chronological order. They wouldn't get to play silent ball or participate in spelling bees. And most of all, they would never get to be normal, immature, youthful, silly children. They took on the adult role at such a young age and it would continue throughout the following generations.

It was at that moment that I realized I want to teach children that come from broken homes and hard lives. By looking at the kids in that village I knew I wanted to help kids in my own country who live in homes where the lifestyle is hard. Seeing how other children live in the world really opened my eyes to what is out there. I learned a lot about other cultures and it was awful to see how some people live. From traveling to the Dominican Republic I am positive I want to help children who do not have the chance to succeed anywhere else but in school. I want to be a leader in my school's community. I want to make a difference!