

Shavonne Clarke – Editing Sample

Unedited version:

Never Give Up - By Brittany XXXX

I have just about the most heart-warming, gut-wrenchingly incredible story with an extremely important personal life lesson, and I am so happy to share it on this blog.

The Peace Corps is extremely hard; there's no doubt about it. No matter how old you are, what stage of life you're in, what development experience you have, where you're going, or what you'll be doing- being placed alone in a completely foreign culture and expecting to assimilate as fast as possible, is one of the most uncomfortable and challenging things a person can experience. And when you throw in the 'development' angle of trying to help others in the country you're living in, it's doubly hard. During your service, there are times when you try and try, and try until you can try no more, and STILL you try to make the smallest difference- but it's so hard to measure change and impact during your 2 years in the Peace Corps, so oftentimes as a Volunteer I have felt frustrated and in my worst moments, cynical.

During the last 6 months of my service, I pushed really hard to get a number of projects off the ground in my community. One project was teaching a 4-month entrepreneurship course at the top University in Paraguay, *Nacional Universidad de Asuncion*, which happens to have an agriculture branch in Caazapa. The 4-month business course, 'Construye tus Suenos,' is designed to teach youth how to create their own business plans, and ultimately start their own businesses. Business plans are extremely necessary to successfully launch a business- and the course teaches all the important concepts an entrepreneur needs to know before launching a venture, like doing a feasibility study, analyzing costs and prices, learning basic accounting, understanding supply and demand and how to market their product or service, etc. They are also important, especially in Paraguay, to be able to take out a loan from a financial institution to start said business. And with 70% youth unemployment in Paraguay and a serious lack of innovation to address needs in their communities, entrepreneurship is an incredible tool to empower kids to create their own employment and have a successful future.

Another important point of this course is that it funnels into my sector's national initiative, *Paraguay Emprende*. With the completed business plans, each Peace Corps Volunteer picks the best plan in their community to attend a national business plan competition, with the objective that the winners get seed funding to actually start their own businesses. I launched the first national business plan competition as Project Manager last year (then *Jovenes Empresarios del Paraguay*), and so it's a project I hold very close to my heart, and I really believe in it's mission.

So this course- I don't think I have ever worked harder in my life for this to be a success. I met with various heads of the school and with a local government institution to certify the course so that it's value would be recognized internationally. I spent DAYS preparing for each class- literal days. Meticulous hours spent on memorizing Spanish business terms, creating interactive and dynamic Powerpoints, looking all over the internet for inspirational speeches from the world's best entrepreneurs (and in Paraguay as well), calling friends and discussing with them certain terms I didn't fully understand so that I knew it cold for the class. I even did pre run-throughs in my house before my 3-hour weekly class. The dedication I had for my students to be inspired and motivated was on the highest level of achievement I could make it.

Yet while the class started with 40 students, over the weeks it dwindled down to seven. SEVEN. And as it is in Paraguay, classes were cancelled- constantly. The Paraguayan professor who helped me with the course would tell me half an hour before a class that it was cancelled because of the rain, or because everyone was suddenly on vacation, or because the heads from Asuncion came to visit the school and give a presentation, or because it was hazing day for the incoming freshman, or because no one just showed up. And after living in Paraguay for 2 years, I know that this is just how things are here- that if someone doesn't want to do something, and can think up of an excuse not to come, they won't. And it's very, very common for a class that starts with 100 students, or 70, or 40, or 10, to halve after the 3rd or 4th class.

I knew these things, and I tried not to take it personally, but it still hurt. It hurt to be knocking myself out to the point of stuffing unicorns and rainbows and inspirational-'you can follow your dreams' speeches down their throats every class and performing as if I was on stage, to have over 75% of my class be completely apathetic to it. To plan fun activities and exercises to make tough concepts like supply and demand fun and engaging, yet have 4 students show up for a class I spent hours preparing for.

To pepper them with questions and continuously ask to check their homework, which were all different sections of the business plan, which no one ever did. There were so many times that I asked myself over and over again- *WHY am I doing this if no one cares?!*

But after the first half of the course passed, I started to see that the same seven people were showing up to class every week. One student, Edgar, started showing up to my house and asking for outside help on creating his business plan. He grows organic tomatoes, and needed capital to purchase supplies to create a greenhouse, which would triple his production. While he was shy and nervous and spoke more Guarani than Spanish, I could hear the passion in his voice and the ambition to realize his dreams. Then there was Giovanni, a 21 year old powerhouse that had written his thesis on tomato production, and felt strongly that he could bring the best tomato to the Caazapa market- especially since all tomatoes in Caazapa come from other areas in Paraguay. His five year vision was to expand all the way to Asuncion, the capital of Paraguay. Out of the mere five people that actually finished the course, these were the 2 guys that were selected to attend the national business plan competition. We practiced their presentations, and I critiqued their Powerpoints and business plans to make them as competitive as possible. They were nervous, but excited to attend the competition- and especially because they both needed money to launch their ventures in Caazapa.

About 400 people took the 'Construye tus Suenos' course in Paraguay this year. Out of 400 people, about 40 were selected to go to the national business plan competition, a rigorous 3-day event full of judges and industry professionals from all over the country.

The outcome of the event was unprecedented. Out of 400 kids, Edgar and Giovanni, my two students, BOTH won first place. They each won 2.5 million Guaranies to launch their businesses. Giovanni won an award for Best Presentation. The level of prestige for them is unrivaled- from two shy campo kids coming from small rural towns outside of Caazapa, they now KNOW that they will be a success. They now have access to mentors and have recognition from national institutions like AJE Paraguay and Cooperativa Universitaria. They have 2.5 million each to launch their businesses, and now are connected to outside resources for other potential sources of capital, including even larger business plan competitions. Incredible does even begin to describe it. Their lives will be impacted forever. But MOST IMPORTANTLY, they now know that their hard work, dedication, and motivation to realize their dreams is worth pursuing- and for kids that live in a culture where so many people don't believe that true change can happen, and so don't even try- that is completely priceless.

This has been an incredible life lesson for me in so many ways. It's very easy to get jaded about development, or feel cynical about how much of a difference you are making. But the ultimate lesson for me is to keep being inspired, and to believe- believe that there are people out there like Edgar and Giovanni who had the courage to follow their dreams, and against all odds did it. And to believe that all of those hours I spent preparing for classes and teaching it to them, hours that at times I thought were worthless- ended up actually being some of the most worthwhile, incredible, and important work I've done in Paraguay. I wish I could put my feelings into words, but it's not possible. All I can say is that I am in complete awe of my two students, and I have never felt so proud in my life.

Congratulations, Edgar and Giovanni. Go out there and shake up Caazapa, and then Paraguay, and then the world.

I leave you with a video I showed my students on our first class, because I think it embodies the message I've told them all along: Never give up. Stay Hungry. Stay Foolish.

After editing:

To start, I had 40 students. A few weeks in, there were seven.

I was teaching 'Construye tus Suenos,' a 4-month course designed to teach youth how to create their own business plans, and ultimately start their own businesses. With 70% youth unemployment in Paraguay and a serious lack of innovation to address needs in their communities, entrepreneurship is an incredible tool to empower kids to create their own employment and have a successful future.

I'd never worked harder in my life to succeed than when I taught this course. I met with various heads of the school and with a local government institution to certify its value. I spent days preparing for each class. I memorized Spanish business terms, created interactive and dynamic PowerPoints, looked all over the internet for inspirational speeches from the world's best entrepreneurs, called friends and discussed certain terms I didn't fully understand so that I knew them cold. Before class each week, I did run-throughs in my house.

But as often happens in Paraguay, classes were constantly cancelled. After living in Paraguay for two years, I know that this is just how things are here: if someone doesn't want to do something, and can think up of an excuse not to come, they won't. And it's very common for a class that starts with 100 students, or 70, or 40, or 10, to halve after the third or fourth class.

I knew these things, and I tried not to take them personally, but it still hurt. It hurt to be knocking myself out with 'you can follow your dreams' speeches while over 75% of my class was completely apathetic. It hurt to spend hours planning activities and exercises only to have four students show up. There were so many times that I asked myself over and over again, *why am I doing this if no one cares?*

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The level of prestige for them is unrivaled. From two shy campo kids coming from small rural towns outside of Caazapa, they now *know* that they will be a success. They have access to mentors and have recognition from national institutions like AJE Paraguay and Cooperativa Universitaria, and they're now connected to outside resources for other potential sources of capital, including even larger business plan competitions.

Their lives will be impacted forever. But most importantly, they now know that their hard work, dedication, and motivation to realize their dreams has been worth it. For kids that live in a culture where so many people don't believe that true change can happen, and so don't even try, that is completely priceless.

This has been an incredible life lesson for me. It's very easy to get jaded about development, or feel cynical about how much of a difference you are making. But the ultimate lesson for me is to keep being inspired, to believe that there are people out there – like Edgar and Giovanni – who have the courage to follow their dreams, and will do so. And to believe that all those hours I spent preparing for classes and teaching them – hours that at times I thought were worthless – ended up actually being some of the most worthwhile, incredible, and important work I've done in Paraguay.

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