

My name is TJ Irvin, and I was blessed to be a part of the mission trip to El Recreo, El Salvador in June 2011. As I discuss the trip with family and friends I continue to use the word amazing. The problem with that word is that I also use it to describe my vacations to Greece, Rome, and Disney World.

El Salvador was certainly a different kind of amazing! It was amazingly eye opening, amazingly spiritual, and amazingly life impacting. We were immersed in a third world country where things we consider normal necessities, like transportation, indoor plumbing, and electricity, were a fancy luxury. A place where shoes, clothing, and food were not plentiful, but love was. Now like any community of human beings they had their quarrels and disagreements amongst each other, but even through that I saw a sense of pride, and felt a love that melted my heart.

We were able to visit many different places. There were hospitals and clinics that communities are so proud to have, and all some of these clinics are is a 10x10 metal shed with no windows and stocked with simple medical supplies like pain reliever that we can buy over the counter. One place that really touched my heart was a physical therapy clinic. The clinic mainly helps kids with varying degrees of mental and physical challenges. I sat down and spoke with one of the ladies in charge. I was amazed to hear that parents/grandparents cared for their differently able kids so much that many would make a half days walk, if they could not hitch a ride from a passing car, from their community to bring their child to therapy. Some may even carry their child who is unable to walk.

After we got into El Recreo I had a chance to walk around the community (basically huts and shacks lining one rudimentary cobblestoned road) with a few young people and a middle-aged farmer. As we walked we asked each other questions (as much as our language barrier would allow). As we passed a hut one of the high school aged boys tapped me on the shoulder and said "TJ, es mi casa!" With a big smile on his face he pointed out his home to me (which would be condemned as unlivable to US standards) and told me he lived there with 4 siblings, his mother, father, and grandpa. To us these people have basically nothing, but they are so proud of what they do have. That is an amazing, but simple life lesson that so many of us Americans don't seem to grasp.

The last day we visit El Recreo Father Vince says mass, and with money raised by the parishioners of St. Boniface we pay for a meal/gathering for all the members of the community. They had pinata's, one for the girls and one for the boys. I watched and took picture from up in a tree as these little children acted like any child from around the world would when candy came spilling out of the busted pinata. They scampered and climbed over and under each other to get any morsel of the sweets they could get their hands on. With simple things like shoes and food taking priority of the little money they have, I doubt they often get candy, and it must be a special treat when they do!

As I climbed down a little boy Phillippe (who I had spent a good deal of time with during that walk around his community) called my name and held out his hand. He showed me 4 or 5 pieces of candy. I tried to give him a high five and tell him good job. But he was not just showing me what he got. I was blown away. A little boy who has virtually nothing, had only met me a day earlier, and doesn't even speak my language, wanted to give me his candy to show me he is my friend.

I can't explain how much of a blessing this trip was for me; but I can tell you that the people of El Recreo feel blessed by not only for the financial support from the members of St. Boniface, but for the wonderful friendships we have made. After spending time and conversing about life, faith, and family with these people, I truly believe that if something catastrophic happened and our parish could no longer keep supporting El Recreo: the people would be sadder that we stopped coming to visit and spend time with them than they would be about losing the financial support.