



Our Journey to Belize

*An account of the IWHS Campus Ministry Retreat
in June, 2011, by Elisa Caffrey '11*



Day 1, June, 2011

As you walk off the plane after arriving at the Philip S.W. Goldson International Airport in Belize City, the first thing you may notice is the unbearable heat and humidity. The second is the fact that as an International Airport, Philip S. W. Goldson spans about 1/8 of a mile, and has only six terminals. You are not allowed to take out your camera and take a picture of the huge sign that reads “Jesus is Lord,” as a security guard may snap at you to put away your camera, in case you compromise the extensive security systems before passing through customs, which consist of three booths with two guards in each who barely look at your face while checking your passport being too wrapped up in their own private conversation.

And that is how I was welcomed to Belize. After arriving at the airport at 4am and spending a one hour layover in Dallas, the Incarnate Word High School mission group had finally arrived. Together we picked up our baggage (two bags were missing, but were recovered after catching the next flight), and headed out into the Belizean humidity. We were welcomed by our Praying Pelican Mission team leaders, Garrett and Carmen, who after a quick introduction directed us to an old yellow bus, where our bus driver, Eustace, helped load our baggage.

We set off shortly, and headed to Eustace’s home, where his wife had prepared lunch for us, consisting of chicken, rice, beans, bread, and a very colorful bubbly drink, which we hungrily gulped down. Little did we know that, although delicious, every meal for the remainder of our stay would consist of some sort of chicken, rice, beans, and bread combination.

After lunch while waiting for the group from Orange County, CA that would work with us, we headed out to Dorothy Memzys, a home for children who were either orphaned or were in bad home environments. As soon as we arrived, kids came out and began to play with us. We gave them beads and helped them make necklaces and bracelets, then went out to play with them.

All of the kids were very thin, with large, hungry eyes. They showed us some popular dances, like the “Tornado Song”, and kept us entertained through little stories and discussions, all yearning for individualized attention. When it was time to leave some of the younger children came to give us hugs, and we knew they wanted us to stay longer, but we still had to pick up the other group and take the two hour drive to drive over to San Ignatius.



The cross-country drive was gorgeous. The scene was picturesque: tall mountains, vast expanses of green grass with few trees. Once in a while we would pass a house, or would wave at locals walking by or playing soccer. As we approached San Ignatius, the sparse house began to move closer and finally we reached the city.

The place we stayed was called “Sacred Heart College,” an offered a high school education to the local teens. The Praying Pelican Missions team gave us a quick tour of the accommodations: two classrooms to sleep in, and a bathroom with only one functioning toilet. The showers were broken, so we would have to wait. Exhausted, we immediately began setting up our sleeping area, doing the best to protect ourselves from the bugs that seemed to crawl out of nowhere. After blowing up the mattresses and setting up our mosquito net tents, we all headed down for dinner, consisting of (you guessed it!) chicken, bread, rice, and beans. After dinner and a quick introductory meeting, we all collapsed into our respective sleeping areas.

Day 2, June, 2011

The next morning we awoke to the same heat and humidity as the day before. Since it was a Sunday, we had to prepare to go to Mass at the local church Eustace dropped us off near the church, and we walked the remainder of the way. On the outside, the church had a classical baroque style, reflecting the history of the region with the European settlement, but



on the inside the church was bright green, and was full of colorful, life-size statues that reflected the Mayan heritage of the region. After mass, we headed downtown to raid the local shops, and then proceeded to take a short nap.

We were woken up around four so we could get ready to go to mass again. Because it was Corpus Christi, we took part in a march from San Ignatius to the nearby town of St. Helena, stopping every now and then to bless the alters locals placed outside their homes. After two hours, we realized it was too much, so our Praying Pelican Missions team called up Eustace who picked us up, and took us to dinner.

Day 3, June, 2011

Day three in Belize consisted of a quick breakfast, and then off to the Sacred Heart primary school, where we spent a couple of hours entertaining the local children. Some girls played soccer with them, while others drew and played Little Sally Walker over and over. Before leaving for the trip, we had purchased skin markers, which the kids used up completely and then went on to using regular Crayola's so that almost every Incarnate Word girl had some sort of neon design on her face.



Soon we had to leave, so we packed up and headed to lunch. After our usual chicken, beans, rice, and bread, we headed back to the primary school. Our goal was to prep the building, washing it down thoroughly before having to paint it. After scrubbing in the heat and getting covered in flex of lead paint



and water, we headed back to Sacred Heart College, where we were able to shower and get ready for youth night.

I realize I mentioned before that the showers did not work, but you should never doubt the ingenuity of an Incarnate Word student: we took a hose, put on our bathing suits, and washed up all together, keeping hidden behind two buildings. It proved very refreshing and necessary, and we continued to do so every following night. After drying off and changing, the local teens arrived. One guy took out a guitar and impressed us all by playing some Jason Mraz and Bruno Mars. We spent the next hour playing different get-to-know-you games, and finally had to say goodbye, inviting them to return the following night.

Day 4, June, 2011

We began day four by heading over to the school building we had begun to prep for painting, and with brushes and hand began to give it an extra layer of color. After many issues with the paint, switching off between water based and oil based, we finally got parts of the school done, and left the rest for the next day.

We left for a resort shortly after lunch so we could go swimming, and then headed out to see some Mayan ruins at Xunantunich. After a long drive and a trip across a river, and another drive hanging out the back of a truck, we reached the ruins. Due to the lack of time, the tour guides gave us a quick introduction to the site, and then let us climb one of the pyramids. The view from the top was ineffable. We could see the Guatemalan border, with the helicopters circulating on top. We could see the nearby town, and the mountains in the distance. And we could see the vast expanse of tree after tree, coming together to form a thick, dark jungle. But our felt glory was short lived, since we had to make it back to the ferry before it closed and left us stranded at the ruins.

Once we returned to our little basecamp, we had just enough time to eat and wash-up, when the teens returned for teen night, and we spent the evening playing games until the security guards that worked the campus grounds asked them to leave, and Mrs. Greene and Mrs. Clayton told us to go to bed.



Day 5, June, 2011

Our last day in San Ignatius was not as exciting. We spent all day painting the school, and being forced to drink water, since Jenny and Carmen, the group leaders for Praying Pelican Mission, seemed to be very fearful we would dehydrate, and get sick. No one did. Once the school was complete our hands were bleeding red paint and turpentine, and we were glad the day was over, especially because it meant only one more night of sleeping on a tiled classroom floor.



By the next morning, however, once our joy of the last night was gone, we realized that we would most likely never see all the kids in San Ignatius again, which made the departure the more bittersweet. We loaded the bus by 6:30 am, and took off though the countryside and off to the coast on our way to Caye Caulker.

We took a bumpy and wet forty-five minute boat ride across the most beautiful aqua blue water, and finally arrived in paradise. Caye Caulker is an island off the coast of Belize known for its beautiful beaches and for its close location to the Belize Barrier Reef, which attracts many scuba divers and snorkelers. Luckily for us, we had the opportunity to go snorkeling as soon as we arrived at the island. After getting our gear, we headed out into the waters on a small boat, and then proceeded to dive off the side and swim with the fishes. The snorkeling guide made sure to point out all the various fish and coral surrounding us, and would dive further to pick up a shell or two to show us. There is no other feeling like being in the middle of an ocean, away from the boat, and feeling the fear and awe of the surrounding fauna.

After about an hour, we had to head back to the boat so that the guides could take us to see some sharks. Although I did not stay in the water very long, getting increasingly uneasy as I felt sharks and stingrays rubbing against my legs, and could just see a stingray's poisonous spine pricking me (that is how Steve Irwin died, you know), many courageous people stayed in, and decided to pet and feel the various oceanic predators.

Soon it was time to leave the sea altogether, and we made our way back to the hotel to wash up and rest. We were then allowed free time to parooze and walk around the three streets that make up Caye Caulker, have lunch,

and the go rest a bit before dinner. After eating three varieties of shrimp, some watermelon, and of course, some Belizean ice-cream, we headed back down to our hotel, for a good night's sleep in a real bed. We woke the next morning, tired but content with the week's experience, and ready to return home.

Belize, like any other trip, had its perfections and its downsides. However, the fact that we were able to even make it as the first Incarnate Word High School mission group and that we were able to leave a newly painted school for children as a permanent mark of our time and service in San Ignatius speaks for itself. We not only bonded as a group, but were able to bond with the local teens and children, sharing truly memorable moments with them. Would I go back? Yes. And I know that though this first experience, we now know how to make the next mission trip a better and more meaningful event for us, for Belize, and for all future Incarnate Word girls to come.



[Sponsors for the trip were Ann Greene and Gloria Clayton. Thirteen students and their three chaperones traveled to Central America to provide one week of service to the poor in Belize. The service trip was organized through Praying Pelicans Ministries.]