

CIY Panama Mission Trip 2006 by Don Current II

I spent July 13th through 25th of this year in Panama with a group of 18 mostly high school and college age students from around the country. We packed into crowded vehicles for rides of anywhere from 1 to 8 hours. We winched and bounced our way up steep, muddy, rutted, and rocky mountain roads while riding in the back of a pickup. We hiked over narrow, muddy, slick, and steep trails through the pouring rain in the mountains while hauling wheel barrows and tools. We waded through fast flowing, rain swollen rivers. We were there in the rainy season, so it rained every single day while we were there. We slept on mud covered ground out with the snakes, mosquitoes, and spiders. We ate chicken and rice numerous evenings. We even had it for lunch and dinner one of the days. Most of all, though, it was one of the most awesome experiences of my life.

We worked side by side with the lead missionaries Glen and Sherrie Russell, as well as another missionary, Corey Courtwright. Glenn and Sherrie have a ministry that somewhat fits the traditional idea of a missionary. They are involved with a Christian Church in David. They have church youth over to their home some evenings, and bible studies throughout the week. They have started, and continue to support more than a dozen churches in the mountains with the native Gnohe people. These churches are led by obreros that the Russells support with supplies, training and prayer as well as monetarily. While we were there we helped the obrero Felipe in Soloy by painting as well as pouring a concrete porch for a dorm that houses youth who attend a nearby school. While they are with Felipe, they are housed, fed, and ministered to, as long as they abide by the rules.

We also helped Josue and Porfidio in Chami by building a church up in the mountains. This church is simply eight metal poles supporting a roof made of corrugated metal. This is what most of the churches in the mountains are like. They make a few low wooden benches for pews to sit on, and it keeps them out of the rain and hot sun. We also got to worship with the indigenous people at Chami. They came from all around the area. Since it was raining we crowded into a grass hut that was fairly large as far as grass huts go, but still not really large enough for the 30 or 40 people that were there. They sang many songs. They weren't exactly the Mormon Tabernacle Choir, but you could tell they loved to sing. Josue gave a message, and my Spanish had improved enough by this point that I was able to keep up. Afterward we had a VBS type program for the children. We did this in the evening at each of the locations we did a work project at. The children were shy, but attentive.

One of the days we were invited to lead a VBS at one of the local public schools around San Felix. The local obrero, Beto, has been doing this for a while. At the end of each Semester, the school has a special day of activities for the students before they go on a two week break. They invited Beto to present at this, and he got with Glen and Sherrie to have them help, which they have done for the past few semesters. Our trip coincided with the end of this semester, which coincidentally was also National Kids Day. We presented a VBS to over 150 kids. We sang songs, gave a lesson, completed a craft, and then split them up into smaller groups and played games with them. Everyone had a great time.

I was impacted the most by the project we performed in Sardena. This project required the most physical effort both due to the location and the project itself. We had to hike from the truck down rugged terrain partway into a valley while hauling all of our supplies. This is where the church and a school were located and where we set up base camp. Next we hiked even further over a newly made trail down to the bottom of the valley. Here is where we began constructing a pond, which required moving a lot of dirt. Thankfully Rafael, the local obrero, and the other locals had already cleared the trees and brush from the area. The other missionary, Corey, heads up these projects. He is 28 years old and has a Bachelors in Fish and Wildlife, and a Masters in Aquaculture. He is not at all what you would expect from a typical missionary. Yet, his work is just as much of a ministry as those who preach and start churches. The indigenous people in the mountains only make about \$500 per year.

They are dependent almost entirely on what they raise for themselves. During this time of year, their previous crops have run out, and they are still waiting for the next crops to mature. They eat maybe once a day, and its usually just a mash made of Yuca roots. Corey is helping different groups start ponds to raise Tilapia. This will allow them to have a nourishing food source as well as maybe being able to sell some to raise funds for buying other supplies. He is also experimenting with finding a food crop that the Gnobe people can grow to feed their chickens and hogs so they don't have to trek down from the mountains to buy feed with what little money they have. His long term goal goes even further. His desire is that as they begin to make money from fish farming, they will give some money back to their church. This will help make the church independent of the monetary support coming through Glen and Sherrie. As the church becomes independent and continues to grow, then someday, hopefully, they will be able to send out missionaries themselves. That is many years down the road., but is the ultimate goal of his mission work.

I was so impressed by Corey. Here is a young man with a degree in aquaculture which would seem to have no practical purpose in missions, yet he took that and used it to glorify God. He left his family, friends, and home to move to a country who's language he barely spoke. About the only contact he has with English speakers is with Glen and Sherrie, or when groups like ours come from the states. He is entirely dependent on the generosity of those back in the states who support his mission to provide for him as well as for the supplies he needs to perform his work.

This is just a small sampling of what I experienced while in Panama. It is a beautiful tropical country full of beautiful people. I cannot even begin to share with you the numerous emotions I and the rest of the team went through on this trip. We have been wet, cold, hungry, tired, joyful, full of awe and admiration, and full of the Spirit. We shared so much as a team. In just two short weeks I fell in love with people I had never met before and will never forget as long as I live. I especially fell more in love with my Creator. Near the end of the trip I felt a real calling from God. I'm not yet sure what the full extent of the calling is, I just know that I have not been doing enough for the Work. My plan right now is to go back to school for a degree in ministry, so please be in prayer for me that God will reveal what His plan is for my life. Please also remember Corey and the Russells and their ministry.

Finally, I would like to say thank you to all of those that supported this trip both financially and with prayer. This trip would not have been possible without that support. If any of you have a desire to find out more about the work in Panama, or if you would like to help support this work, please contact me. I would be happy to tell you more about it and get you contact information for Corey and the Russells' ministry.