

Panama 2012



July 17, 2012

My name is Lauren Fischer and I'm currently a student at Washington University. I just finished three years of undergrad work in psychology and Spanish, and will begin working on my master's degree in social work at the Brown School next month. I've been blessed to have been involved in the ACTS campus ministry group throughout the past three years; it's been like a family to me, and is the reason I was able to connect with Panama missions. Because I did not grow up in church, overseas mission work was never something I thought about seriously, because it simply didn't seem like a possibility to me. Consequently, this was the first opportunity I've ever taken to join a team in overseas mission work. Initially I had no idea what to expect, but by the end of the trip I was completely overcome by the love and grace of God at work in every experience I had there.

This is
me... with
some new
friends.

My first
full day in
Panama—



Thanks to the generous support of our donors, we were able to impact lives in a variety of really important ways! I am grateful to have traveled with the medical team, where I was able to serve with them in the Darién province as a translator. I am so grateful for that opportunity, and am humbled by the support of our mission. That takes such faith and such passion for the work that's being done, which is so inspiring to me! And it truly could not be accomplished without donor support. Please be encouraged in knowing what a crucial role your gifts play in bringing this about, because God is moving in it, and it starts when He moves through you.

And how very, very blessed we were.



Two canoes, one motor? Not a problem. Just hold them together, of course.



Our “clinic” at the first Embera village. This is where I got to meet/translate for their chief, who was telling us that he wants to build a church for his people!

The majority of my time was spent with a team of doctors and nurses (and a few, like me, who were along to help translate). We traveled throughout the Darién region (adjacent to the Colombian border), which is the most desolate province in Panama. We visited three villages during our stay. The first two were home to people of the Embera tribe—and, as it turns out, are only accessible by dugout canoe up the Chucunaque river.

Mostly, we gave out vitamins, pain medication, triple antibiotic ointment, and parasite pills to the many families who stopped by. This turned out to be a neat way to facilitate conversations about general health—for example, emphasizing the importance of washing wounds in clean water to prevent infection.



We did see a few cases that were much more serious. They’re the ones my heart and mind often wandered back to, and they’re the ones whose stories I’d really like to share.

This woman came her two youngest children to the station where I was translating. Both of these kids were born blind. The older child (on the left) has one eye partially open, and can see well enough to walk if he holds it open. The baby does have eyes (I couldn’t tell if he did or not when I first met him), but they are almost completely sealed shut. They

immediately caught the attention of most of our team. We told the mother that there was no reason her kids wouldn't be just as smart as any of the other children, but that she would be their most important teacher, and would have to use their other senses to help them learn about the world around them. Our team wasn't equipped to do surgery or other intensive intervention work, but we did our best to set up a date for one of our Panamanian contacts to return and take the family to the children's hospital in Panama City. If the mother agrees to it, they may be able to do surgeries there—and if they can open their eyes, these kids might be able to see.

One of our last days working together as a medical team, we went into a village of the Kuna tribe. One of Evangelio's relatives brought him by so that we could take a look at an infected machete wound on his leg. We soon realized that Evangelio himself wasn't very responsive, and his relative quickly jumped in to tell us that "*Él no te puede oír, ni hablar*"—he isn't able to hear you, or talk. We learned that he'd contracted meningitis at age five; apparently the 15 days he'd spent in the hospital were sufficient for his general recovery, but couldn't save his hearing or his voice. He does well in school and gets good grades, but doesn't know any kind of sign language. As others from our team stopped by, they discussed the possibility of getting some kind of occupational therapist in to help him learn sign language or otherwise communicate. I would have loved to talk with him, but the most I could convey directly to him was by gently touching his arm as one of our doctors disinfected his wound. Doc told me it would hurt him quite a bit. It made me realize really how little I could offer in that moment, not being able to warn him or to reassure him that the healing would be worth the momentary pain—not even in my halting Spanish. And it was moments like that which reminded me so clearly that my ability to



This is Evangelio. I wanted so badly to see him smile... and wish I could have talked to him directly.



communicate with God—to pray for them—and the hope of life in Christ, are worth so much more than what I could give to their physical needs.

The team, together one last time before we left the Kuna village

Goodbyes were so difficult. Every once in a while throughout our journey in the Darién it would strike me just how blessed I was. For me, not having grown up in a Christian home, experiencing a fellowship that deep is simultaneously so beautiful and so heartbreaking. So I really had to turn to Jesus' words when I met up with the rest of the team back at the hotel in Tocumen. And it was the day I returned that I read the last sections of Matthew 9, where Jesus ministers to none other than—the blind and the mute.



Then He said to His disciples, “The harvest is plentiful but the workers are few. Ask the Lord of the harvest, therefore, to send out workers into His harvest field.”
Matthew 9:37–38

This is the clinic in Sansón, Darién, where we stayed. It's called the Edificio de Esperanza (Building of Hope), and they're constructing a church next to it. It was so neat to call this home for four days! I can't wait to see what He has for me to do next.

I'd heard these verses before, but I'd never looked closely at the second part, where Jesus asks His disciples to ask God to send His workers. For whatever reason, I resonated so strongly with that when I read it! The entire time I'd been in Panama, I'd never felt more safe (even though, objectively, I'd never been doing anything more dangerous). I'd never had more joy in what I was doing—so much that even I, who can barely drag myself out of bed even on weekends, spontaneously woke up by 5am and was ready and excited to start the day! And I saw how much there still is to do, how many relationships could be built, how many kids needing all kinds of healing could still be reached. I want Him to send His workers to them, and I'll pray that He does in the way that reaches the most people in the greatest way to glorify Him the most. And I so hope that I'll get to continue to be a part of that.

He's given me everything, and because of that I hope to see Him do the same in many more lives. I still have a lot of thinking and praying and surrendering to do, but I feel that He may be calling me to longer-term ministry work in Central America. I was so blessed to be sent—and I hope He sends me.

Again, thank you *so very much* for your support—financial, spiritual, and emotional as well. I know it's an enormous blessing to the entire team, and I can't tell you how much it means to me personally. Before I left, one person in my family told me, “I know this is important to you, but some things just aren't worth the trouble and aren't worth the risk.” Thank you for

understanding that infinite worth is in Jesus alone, and thank you for what you sacrifice out of love for His people—our family—in Panama.

Thank you again. I pray that you're blessed by knowing a bit more of the work you've been a part of here.

Que Dios les bendiga, su hermana en Jesucristo,
(*May God bless you; your sister in Christ,*)

Lauren

