On our first full day in Guatemala, we drove for a couple hours to Lake Atitlan. To get there, we rode on a bus through various curvy roads. When we arrived to Panajachel, our group was placed on two different boats. We travelled across the water to Santiago. The things I saw were pretty amazing. These large houses on the lake were unbelievable compared to the slums that I passed earlier in the morning. I could and still cannot help, but think, “How can people have so much money and others have so little?” I was amazed. However, shortly after I took this picture we arrived to Santiago. There we were bombarded by Guatemalans to buy tourists’ items.

During this excursion, I learned and observed various things about Lake Atitlan. First, I noticed three large volcanos surrounding the lake which was beautiful. I also observed how some Guatemalans enjoy the tourist attraction while many others do not. It is an interruption to their daily lives. Lastly, I will never forget the lasting impact the civil war had on those in Santiago. This excursion was unforgettable and will always stick with me.
After a beautiful rainy day at the lake, we went to Iximche. Because Iximche was already closed, it was only our service team in the ruins. We saw the ball courts, temples, and a sacrificial area. The stones that some Guatemalans sacrificed on were still warm and a colorful banner was hanging over the area. It was also really neat to actually see and visualize the traditional ball game the indigenous people once played. To me, the ruins and the ball court symbolized the Spanish takeover of the indigenous tribes.

By going to the site and listening to a classmate’s presentation, I learned various facts about the archeological site. Iximche was actually abandoned for 400 years until the mid-1950s. Cultural activism was extremely popular in the area until the 1970s when people were murdered and disappeared. Iximche is a true symbol of the indigenous culture and recognized as the giver of life. This experience began one of the several themes of my trip: Spanish conquest the indigenous. The excursion made me very excited to learn even more about Guatemalan culture.
For several days, I was fortunate enough to work with four amazing occupational therapists, one physical therapist, and four other occupational therapy students. Our service site was Missionaries of the Highway, which is a therapy site, school, and orphanage. Each day we followed a different therapist allowing us to take part in different activities. Two of the therapists often focused on sensory, touching on oral motor skills, visual stimulation, and fine motor skills. The other three therapists worked on wheelchairs. As a student, I was fortunate enough to assist in fixing and assembling wheelchairs and also keeping the patient entertained and busy.

At Missionaries of the Highway, I cannot even begin to explain how much I learned. Because I tried to speak as much Spanish as I could, my Spanish speaking skills have greatly improved. The therapists taught me how occupational therapy is all about what the caregiver and patient want. Our practice and service is client-centered. This little boy, Santiago, taught me more than I ever thought I would learn. He taught me that you can have nothing and still enjoy and be happy in life. It is all about the people that surround you and your outlook on life. This service site has changed my life forever and I hope to one day return.

Misioneros del Camino: Kelly, Amy, y yo trabajemos en la silla de ruedas de Santiago. Estemos muy contentos con ésta silla de ruedas. Trabajemos con diligencia para muchas horas.
El mercado:
Después del días de servicio, nuestro equipo fuimos al mercado. Hagamos a la compra para una hora. El mercado fue divertido y relajante.
In the middle of our week long trip, we were fortunate enough to visit La Vega. First, we went to the school where the students performed indigenous ritual dances, told us all about the history of La Vega, played the marimba, and showed us the various huipils. Then we were given a tour by man from La Vega. We walked the entire town of La Vega in just ten minutes. As we were walking we saw the man’s family in front of his house. He lived with his mother, wife, and children. They were kind enough to invite us into their home. There was no electricity and they had to travel to the pila to fetch any water. Children were happily playing while the wife and mother were showing us around the small room. They were so inviting and happy to show us where they live. Then we walked back to the school where a sacrificial chicken ritual was performed by students.

La Vega really put life into perspective for me. While I go to school everyday and dread it, Guatemalans are happy to get an education and make a life for themselves. I take my education for granted. Not only do I take education for granted, but my home, clean water, and electricity. Some of the these people are happier than ever without having much. Almost all of the people in La Vega had faith though. What I really took away from La Vega is things do not make you happy, but people and faith often do.
Gerson and his family moved to Guatemala from El Salvador. Both of his parents came to Guatemala when the Salvadoran war was going on. His family in his town is dedicated to ending gang violence. His sister works at a home with children from parents who became deceased due to such violence or parents who have abused them. When I asked Gerson why he believes gang violence is so apparent in his community he responded, “People who grow up in this community usually never go to high school. They make it to about sixth or seventh grade and often do not attend their classes. Children grow up neglected. Many parents have drinking problems and are violent. Violence is too apparent.” He then went on to tell me about how a store owner was shot by a gang only last year because he would not give the gang money. Gerson told me that he dedicates his life to ending such violence by spreading awareness and providing alternative opportunities for the children growing up in this community.

I choose this particular picture because all four of these men helped interpret and guide us through our Guatemalan journey. All of them have dedicated their lives to such great causes and they are amazing role models. One day I aspire to be as selfless as they truly are.
After our last day at Missionaries of the Highway, I was lucky enough to get to go to Steve’s house. Although all the kids over two years old were not there, the children two years old and younger were. We walked into his house and saw about ten babies on the first floor that were a year and younger. We were able to hold, feed, and play with them as much as we wanted. However, I then went downstairs to an older group of two year olds. That is where I met these two little ones. Santiago and Angie were two happy youngsters that immediately put a smile on my face. As I would sing to them, they both would giggle loudly. Then it was time for the children to eat, which was a site to see. Over ten children were in a line of highchairs, eight children where at a large wooden table, and Santiago and Angie were at this table. I assisted them eating and they were happier than ever. Shortly after this though, we had to leave, but they both waved goodbye with a huge grin on their faces.

Amor del Niño amazed me. Steve and his wife are so inspirational. They taught me that love can truly be enough. All of these children love Steve like he is their father. He taught me so much in Guatemala about truly making a difference and loving with one’s whole being. In the U.S. we tend to focus on money and material possessions, but Steve dropped all of this for children in Guatemala who deserve to be loved. One day I honestly hope I can be like Steve and open my heart to love and serve others.
On our last full day of Guatemala, I woke up sad already. I was not ready to leave and felt that I have developed a new passion for serving individuals in such impoverished conditions. However, when we arrived at our last excursion I was determined to climb the volcano and not think about leaving Guatemala the next day and I did exactly that. While I can say climbing this volcano was definitely a challenge, I would do it again in a heart beat. Just like we successfully provided sustainable service to Guatemalans, all of the students as a team made it up the volcano.

From our first Guatemala meeting to now, I can honestly say I could not have completed my Guatemalan journey without each one of these individuals. They taught me to never give up, serve others from the bottom of my heart, and to love and trust others. They are a large part of why my experience was so amazing and life changing. All of them knew that I did not want to leave as I cried all night long after climbing this volcano, but each one of them comforted me commenting about how maybe this is God’s plan for me in the near future. So now, in the U.S. not a day goes by where I am taking everything for granted. I aspire to reflect the friendly and welcoming Guatemalan culture in my daily life.

Volcán de Pacaya: Después de la semana larga, otros estudiantes y yo escalemos un volcán. Era muy difícil. En la foto, nos sentimos logradas.