

**Valuable Lessons Abroad**  
**CCBC Service Learning in Big Falls, Belize**

**By Rachele Lawton**

Assistant Professor, Coordinator of ESOL, CCBC Essex  
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Situated in the rain forest of Belize, a small, Central-American nation, lies a tiny, rural village called Big Falls Village. Located in the Toledo District, the nation's poorest, and inhabited mostly by Maya Amerindians, Big Falls Village is the location of CCBC Catonsville's annual summer Service Learning Project, which takes place for roughly two weeks in July. The project was conceived and implemented six years ago by Jean Waagbo, International Student Advisor & Program Coordinator in the Office of Multicultural Affairs on the Catonsville campus and Herb Wilcox, a now retired adjunct professor and advisor to international studies also from Catonsville. I was fortunate to have been involved with the project during the summer of 2003 as a CCBC faculty leader. In addition to providing me with many meaningful experiences and teaching me numerous lessons, Project Belize reaffirmed for me the importance of experiential service learning, particularly abroad.

The initial goals of the international service learning project that Jean Waagbo and Herb Wilcox had envisioned were threefold: to create an international learning experience for CCBC students, to recruit a diverse group of volunteers, and to provide a service that would assist a community in another country. These goals are achieved each summer as the CCBC group travels to Belize to work with the Big Falls RC (Roman Catholic) School, which consists of the equivalent to grades K-8. Once in Belize, CCBC volunteers (who have been administrators, faculty, staff and students) assist the Belizean

teachers in maximizing their existing resources, as they must teach without access to some of the most basic supplies. More specifically, the group helps them work on developing their curriculum in innovative and creative ways.

While the summer learning experience is fun and educational for both students and teachers, an important aspect of the camp is helping the children maintain their English language skills. Belize (previously called British Honduras) gained its independence in 1981, and its official language is English. However, because Belize's population is comprised of diverse indigenous peoples and Big Falls Village is located in a rural, remote area of the county, English is, in reality, more of a second language for most of the students with whom the CCBC group works. Although the students use English on a daily basis during the school year, as it is the language of instruction, teachers find that many students lose some of their English abilities during the summer break. Therefore, one of the summer camp's purposes is to help the children maintain their English over the summer through teaching them their regular subjects (Science, Language Arts, Math) as well as offering them more "camp-like" subjects (music, arts and crafts, outdoor activities, sports).

As a teacher of English to Speakers of Other Languages, the linguistic element was one aspect of the project that particularly fascinated me. Belize has always had a diverse linguistic tradition, with inhabitants who have emigrated from various places, practice a variety of customs, and speak English, Spanish, Creole, Garifuna (a Caribbean-based language), Maya, Mopan, Kekchi and other languages. The awareness we gained of the various ethnic, cultural and linguistic backgrounds represented by the students in our classrooms was in itself valuable. Although all of the students were Belizean

citizens, I was able to observe parallels between them and the students in my classrooms at CCBC who arrive from countries all over the world speaking a variety of languages.

As the students and inhabitants of Big Falls Village are diverse in many ways, the CCBC group's cultural awareness and sensitivity is an integral component of the project's success. The majority of Big Fall Village residents are Mayan Amerindians, so the CCBC group must become familiar with many aspects of the Mayan culture, which has preserved many of its older traditions for centuries. The primary source of income for the Maya is agriculture, as they as a people are strongly connected to the land. Many of them also make beautiful handicrafts, and their skills are a beautifully preserved tribute to ancient traditions in the form of baskets, carvings, pottery, jewelry and other creations.

For the Mayas, modesty, particularly amongst the women, is very important, so members of the group must be conscious of dressing in an appropriate manner. Another significant element of Mayan culture is fertility, and 'one' family may consist of 10-15 people all living together in one house or, more accurately, one room.

Additionally, keeping this culture that is so different from members of the group's culture intact—in the sense that it has survived as it is for such a lengthy period of time—is a particularly sensitive aspect of the Service Learning Project. As the Mayan culture has undergone relatively minimal changes over many centuries, it is essential to avoid making judgments or imposing 'outside' beliefs and values on it. It is also necessary to be aware of the dangers of overexposing our Belizean friends to materialistic elements of our culture that are not possible in theirs. Naturally, the CCBC group undergoes a substantial amount of training before departure, and this is a vital element of international service learning, particularly in a context where individuals' customs and beliefs may

vary significantly from those of the 'outsiders' who are coming to exist within a particular culture for a period of time. Diversity, culture shock, customs, communication styles and conflict resolution are all significant to the Project Belize training program and are an enlightening experience, particularly for students who may not possess any knowledge or awareness of any culture beyond their own.

Even though we'd gone through a fairly in-depth training process, nothing, of course, could truly prepare us for the authentic experiences we were about to have upon arrival in Belize. After our plane touched down, we traipsed through the airport loaded down with giant bins full of the supplies we would need for the summer camp (crayons, glue, scissors and paper, which may seem like the most basic of supplies, are in great demand in Big Falls and completely filled our nearly unmanageable bins). As we ventured more closely to our destination by way of a tiny propeller-plane and then a small bus, none of us knew exactly what to expect from the next two weeks, and this seemed to be the best outlook, as we knew experiences could vary from individual to individual. One thing became abundantly clear almost immediately, however, and that was the amazing impact our camp has had on the children of Big Falls each summer.

The children had been waiting for us eagerly, and although camp didn't start until 9:00 each morning, they would appear almost daily at 7:30 or 8:00 and just watch us, waiting for camp to begin, as we went through our habitual morning preparations. In addition to catching a glimpse of their little faces peering inside our store room each morning, one of the visions most etched upon my memory is that of groups of barefoot children walking miles each morning to attend our camp. Big Falls Village had just gotten its first main paved road, and the tropical sunrays scorched us each day as we

walked back and forth from our guesthouse, the school and a local restaurant where we regularly had meals. I could only imagine what the roasting tar of the road felt like on the children's naked feet. Many students came from surrounding villages and had even farther to walk on even less developed roads. However, they seemed oblivious to this and arrived excitedly each day.

After spending some time with the kids, I came to an interesting realization. While it was far from an insightful epiphany yet still meaningful to me, I realized that to a large degree, children are simply children, regardless of where they are from, what they believe, or what numerous other factors may have affected their lives. Our students were children with incandescent smiles like those of many other children, but their simple happiness shrouded the fact that many of them would be asked to abandon their education and not come back because of inadequate performances upon reaching middle school. Those with learning issues or other problems, which we could perceive, had a lesser chance of even reaching middle school. Even fewer, of course, have the opportunity to go on to college. The Belizean teachers were amazing and gave their best despite the limited resources accessible to them. At the end, I felt brutally aware of the injustice associated with educational opportunities in many parts of the world.

As we worked with the children, we had to keep in mind that many of them lived with large numbers of family members in one room, so they were unfamiliar with the concept of privacy or personal space, which was evident as they swarmed around us, calling out "Miss!" "Miss!" "Pick me, miss!" "I'm next, Miss!" Although it was a bit overwhelming at first, this kind of attention brought into focus the impact we had on these children and how fortunate I felt to be a part of this unique experience.

Big Falls Village itself is a memorable place. Set in the rainforest, it has a lush, captivating sense of peacefulness. Each day at around 5:30 AM, I would go for a run or walk and soak in the village's early-morning tranquility. Humidity assumed the form of a soothing, light haze that I didn't mind at all; rather, it was conducive to reflecting upon what I was experiencing in this new place. Occasionally, animals such as chickens or cows would find their way into the middle of the road and gaze at me, almost indignantly, as if I were invading their territory although they allowed me to share it with them without incident.

Throughout the entire country, Belize is replete with various forms of natural beauty from its splendid rainforest, cascading water falls and wildlife preserves to its sparkling beaches and incomparable underwater marine life. The Mayan ruins situated in many parts of the country reminded us again that the Maya have struggled and survived for a long period of time and made us feel that we were contributing to the strengthening of future generations.

All in all, I returned from Belize feeling that the benefits of International Service Learning are innumerable. Having traveled in many parts of the world, I am a passionate advocate of leaving comfort zones and embracing travel as a true learning experience, but experiencing service learning firsthand in this capacity particularly illuminated its importance for me. The partnership between two nations and, more specifically, two schools, has demonstrated the positive effect a project such as this one can have on both a foreign community and the institution participating in the project. The Belize Service Learning Project is also, in a way, representative of the cultural, ethnic and linguistic diversity present throughout CCBC, so it is an especially appropriate pairing. I truly

believe that all individuals should step outside of their 'comfort zone' to experience different ways of life and culture and to hopefully return home with something precious: the invaluable sense of having given selflessly while receiving much more than what was ever expected.

I returned to the U.S. with a longing for both the people of Big Falls Village, Belize and the simplicity of their way of life. I also possessed a profound realization of the significance of our thriving partnership, now in its sixth year. CCBC's relationship with students and teachers in another corner of the world is a salient example of the value of service learning abroad.

Jakob

Prompt: Evaluate a significant experience, achievement, risk you have taken, or ethical dilemma you have faced and its impact on you.

As I walked toward the building, a projectile flew down from one of the windows, missing me by only a few feet. It was accompanied by much yelling and noise. I prepared myself for what I must inevitably do; I stepped into the room and the sight that greeted my eyes was far worse than anything I could have imagined. My class of over forty Belizean children was in total chaos.

I was on my two-week service-learning project with my community college. We were collaborating with local teachers to conduct a summer camp in a southern Belizean village. I had volunteered, to teach the six to ten year olds, generally considered to be the worst behaved class. This was a decision that I was now regretting.

Normally my class would be eagerly waiting for me to begin the day's activities. They would not have become disruptive for at least an hour or two after class had begun. Today however there was no reprieve. There was screaming and shouting, some were standing on desks and even a brawl or two to contend with. My normal group of trouble makers got a puzzle out, and proceeded to throw the pieces all around the room. Once I walked in I quickly became the target of several pieces. I was now faced by a room full of Belizean children who were fed up with learning about the Romans and just wanted to go play futbol. My facade of control had now been completely shattered. The Belizean teacher that I was paired with was characteristically late, and without her, I feared restoring order would be nearly impossible. In just a few moments I had been reduced from a knowledgeable figure of authority to a punching bag scarcely half a dozen years older than the oldest of them. Nevertheless, I tried everything I knew, or thought I knew, in an endeavor to regain control of the classroom, but nothing worked. My gentle persuasions were not even heard. My bribes of fun and games only served to further excite them. My shouts and demands either blended into the general chaos or were simply ignored. I was just at my wit's end when I suddenly heard the project leader from the college shouting from the other door to my classroom. She had come to get some supplies from my room and, like me, was horrified by the state of the class. With her help I was able to subdue the class and continue with the day's lesson. However, for the rest of the day I maintained only a very tenuous control, and I doubt that the children payed much attention to what I tried

to teach them.

At dinner that night we discussed the day's events, and my companions offered their condolences and sympathies. By this time, I was laughing at the whole experience as well as at myself, and was more concerned with avoiding a repeat situation in the days to come rather than worrying about what had passed. Even though I had been greatly humbled by the event, my sense of determination required me to return to the classroom. I felt that I was better prepared to handle whatever chaotic situation I would encounter, whether in the classroom or when I returned home. Perhaps the most important thing that I learned was how to think on my feet, and better anticipate disasters. I also realized that even with the best of intentions uncontrollable events occur and sometimes the most you can do is to laugh them off and learn enough to survive another day. It was not long before the tale became legendary. As I walked home that evening, I realized that I may have traveled to Belize to educate these children, but on this particular day I undoubtedly was the one that got an education.