Dear Diary,

I have so much to say.

Yesterday was one of the most eye opening days of my entire life. I think that as more time passes, the more I am realizing how impactful it was.

I went to Aguablanca, one of the ‘districts’ within Cali to visit with people involved in NGOs there.

After talking with people who are from Colombia / Cali today and yesterday I am realizing that *no one* goes to Aguablanca. Like… *no one*.

If you aren’t from the area, going there is considered to be a death wish.

I was definitely nervous leading up to going. I was researching about all of the crime that happens there, and after discovering that they are the capital of homicide (murder) in Colombia, I was feeling even more nervous.

I was the only white person I saw the entire time that I was there.

First I listened to a meeting between Germán and Fallola, a 21 year old girl who is currently going to Universidad de Valle, the public university in Cali. She is studying psychology, but she has been helping out with non profits since she was little. She was actually brought up by an NGO, Fundación Paz y Bien when she was a young girl. She is currently helping with an NGO that serves to empower afro-women in Cali. They want to encourage women to get an education, get jobs, and to feel powerful despite their circumstances.

As we all spoke, we were sitting on a street corner at a pandaría. Across the street was the police office, where people were lined up outside (I’m not sure what for…) There were rows of motorcycles parked outside that belonged to those who worked in the office. They could no longer take their vehicles inside unless it was an officially registered vehicle because last year in Bogotá there was a terrorist attack on the police station where a bomb was attached to a motorbike parked inside of the station… resulting in the deaths of a lot of people. There was a police officer standing right next to us, a friendly looking guy.

Everyone here is afro (black). There is a bit of a ‘fleeing’ feeling coming from everyone in the area… you can tell by the way that people hold their bags and look around as if to not stay for long. Anyone who has a bag is clutching it tightly on their lap as they sit.

Those who are working, behind the counter at the pandería or as an officer in the street, seem to be pretty open and happy people. The booths in the street are getting set up as we sit and talk to one another. It’s about 9:30 am and the neighborhood is beginning to wake up.

The second meeting was with a woman who was in charge of an NGO that has been around in Aguablanca for 30 years.. She was one of the first people to move to Aguablanca. This is because the city was basically nothing before a ‘sea-quake’ aka an earthquake in the sea that causes a tsunami, forced a lot of people to move from the Pacific Coast to Cali to seek refuge. Today, I also learned that a lot of the people of Aguablanca probably migrated there as refugees during the civil war.

So after people started moving to Aguablanca, it’s population skyrocketed. Now at least 30% of the population of all of Cali exists in its small borders. But, unfortunately the values of the people who live in the barrios of Aguablanca have historically been enveloped by violence and crime.

Aguablanca has a homicide index higher than anywhere else in Colombia. It might even be the highest in all of South America.

So in this NGO, the goal was to try to stop petty violence among neighbors who are lending money to each other. Right now, a lot of small businesses who are in the area will lend small amounts of money to people who are working during the day (ie selling coffee, pan, toys, etc..) and charge ridiculous interest rates that only allow the money to be loaned for a day or so. However, since nothing is legally binding, if people don’t pay their loans back in a timely manner, then the only solution is to break someone’s leg or kill someone or resort to violence of some sort. This NGO was trying to start loan services to combat this violent-loan habit. Unfortunately, in their first round of loans they didn’t have someone to record the finances well enough, and they ended up losing basically all of the money that had been gifted to them because no one was paying their loans back. They still hope to continue the service, but are at a bit of a loss for where to begin.

In other areas, they are trying to give food out to the community through their kitchen. They get donations of food and they either give it for free or sell it at a low price to people in the area. But, I guess that isn’t working out too well either because they are giving a lot of the food away to family members / friends and the whole organization is a bit informal. I like their platform though, as they are very focused on women empowerment as well, and I *think* that they only employ women.

This meeting took place in an ‘office’ that looks like it could just be a home on the sides of one of the streets. Inside there was a long table that we sat at, with binders of papers on the walls in filing cabinets behind a desk. At another desk, there is an old monitor / desktop computer. The woman in charge has her own laptop that seems to be relatively new and in good shape. I taught her how to use google translate for gmail and for websites on chrome. That was a big deal for her I think.

I asked her about the difficulties of starting foundations like the one that she has started or foundations that deal with women empowerment in the area because I had learned that the first girl we spoke with had received death threats to stop her business with the NGO. Initially, I thought that these threats were about suppressing women, but it turns out that it was likely a result of housing a high-profile NGO woman who is lobbying against some land-stuff that miners aren’t too happy about (so the threats in this case probably had more to do with land than about women’s rights).

Either way, she said that it is a hard problem to solve and that being a part of anything NGO related is a dangerous task in a place like Aguablanca.

Just typing all of this out right now is making me pause and think about how fortunate I am. I was able to visit this place and see first hand what life could look like in a neighborhood like this… and then I was able to leave. I left to a part of the city of Cali that is incredibly safe in comparison and super rich and privileged. Even here though, people still have that mentality of ‘no dar papaya’ embedded deeply into them because of the rough history of crime. Reasonably so… considering that there is still a ridiculous amount of crime that happens here (and still homicides, though far less). At the end of this month, I’ll hop on a flight and leave the safest part of Cali as well. I’ll head back to California and enjoy a few weeks of travel, and then I’ll settle down in Boulder. A town full of white, well-off people who aren’t violent in any way by the looks of it.

I’ll continue to work on my PhD from the safe confines of my home, the university, cafes, libraries, friends homes, coworking spaces, and the like. I’ll walk around alone at night often. I’ll bike my way back and forth from school. I’ll walk around the town of Boulder to get to know it better. I’ll be alone frequently. I’ll forget my phone or my wallet and be okay. I’ll get lost and not freak out. I’ll wear whatever the fuck I want and not get heckled on the street. I’ll *never* fear for my life. I’ll go to bed every night knowing that there isn’t something that will kill me before I’m able to wake up the next morning… I’ll presume my safe life back in the USA.

Meanwhile, these people that I met in Aguablanca will still be there. They’ll still be carrying their backpacks in front of their body, thinking twice before ever pulling out a phone from a bag, rarely risking being outside at night, and probably never getting the chance to be outside **alone**at night. They’ll struggle to find quality education and try to make their way in life, but the reality is that without education, the odds of leaving Aguablanca are very slim.

So, they may start a family there. And the cycle continues.

These thoughts are a bit sobering for me, I’m still trying to figure out how to process them.

Continuing with the story…

After meeting this woman, Germán and I went to the barrio that is the 2nd most dangerous in all of Aguablanca. The homicide rate here is ridiculously high.

We got on a bus and took it to the neighborhood, then waited at a pandaría for his ‘colleagues’ to arrive. The people we were meeting were from an NGO based out of the USA called *cure violence*. Their approach to solve violent crime issues in neighborhoods is to *cure* it as if violence is a disease. I think the idea behind the platform is absolutely incredible.

Initially, while waiting at the pandería, a man approached us who was one of the old interrupters for cure violence. He is no longer an interrupter because he started doing too many drugs.

The other two men who we are meeting eventually make their way to us. James is a very personable (and honestly pretty cute) guy who is probably in his early to mid-twenties who is also an interrupter. The other guy, Oscar, is probably in his late 20’s to early 30’s and I think he is the new president of cure violence in that neighborhood. Germán buys everyone a pastry or a drink, and we all begin to walk around the neighborhood. As we walk around, I can feel the piercing gaze of anyone that I walk past. The streets are pretty empty, but there are still people out and about socializing with each other. We stop at a few graffiti murals in specific parts of the neighborhood that are meant to promote the movement to cure violence (and to fix other things in the neighborhood like trash, electricity, etc.)

As we walk, I am next to James who is explaining the whole mission of the project to me. Everything is in Spanish, but luckily he was very kind to speak slowly, and I think I actually got the majority of what he was speaking about.

As we walk further into the neighborhood, he explains to me the methodology for curing violence from the source. He explains that there are three gangs who pretty much run the neighborhood, and the violence stems from them. At one point, we are walking past an empty area on one of the expansive dirt roads. No one is around. People are watching from the comfort of their gated homes. I pull out my phone subtly to take a photo, James seems a bit tense. I quickly put it away.

I didn’t realize it until just at this moment, but that was probably one of the worst places I could have pulled out my phone… because it was after that moment that he began to explain to me that right where we were, there was a place called ‘La Oficina’. In this place, you can *literally order crime*. All you have to do is walk in, tell them who you want killed or what you want them to do, pay for it, and it’ll be done.

Germán told me after our visit that we were likely being watched by gang members and part of the Guerilla the whole time we were there.

After walking around the neighborhood, James and Oscar accompanied us to the bus terminal, where we caught the bus back to downtown Cali. We ate lunch and discussed everything… which I was incredibly grateful for because I realized how much of the conversations I had missed since everything had been in Spanish all day.

As I walked back from lunch to San Antonio, I saw a woman walking with her backpack clenched in front of her body. I almost laughed. The neighborhoods around San Antonio are child’s play compared to Aguablanca.

When I said goodbye to Germán, I walked back to the hostel alone… and realized that I had never felt more confident or safe walking alone in South America as I had right at that moment. I saw groups of police officers on the side of the road clearly on a mission to do something, and I felt an urge to follow them and see what they were doing. I saw homeless people laying on the stairs and went up the staircase anywhere, carefully avoiding their bodies. I made eye contact with people who were staring at me. I j-walked.

It’s crazy how experiences like this put everything into perspective. During my first days here, I was freaking out at times when I was walking alone in the streets. When people were staring at me or cat-calling me I felt uncomfortable. I was afraid to make a wrong move or to get lost for fear of pulling my phone out. Now, I’m realizing that I really don’t have all that much to worry about in San Antonio (as long as it’s during the day at least).

If I walk confidently, safety really isn’t a concern in this area.

What was crazy to me though is hearing Julian, Natalia, and Juan at lunch today besides themselves that I had gone to Aguablanca. They said that most Caleños will never experience going there in their entire lives. Or if they do, it’ll probably only be once. Julian himself has only been once.

I am so fucking grateful for Germán for giving me the opportunity to experience that. I think it’s going to take a bit more time to really understand the impact that yesterday had on me as a person, but already I am feeling a change.

I am feeling a sense of determination. I wouldn’t necessarily call it urgency. I think that coming here and attempting to start social-change projects has shown me the reality of change, *it’s slow*. So urgency isn’t always a good thing. But, I am feeling motivated as hell.

The cure violence project has lowered the crime rates in the barrio of san antonio *so much*. I don’t remember the exact statistics, but I think they went from 20 something murders in 2017 to 6 or something in 2018…

Unfortunately, there are already 6 or 10 from 2019…

After seeing what an impact personable and trusted members of a community can have on its values, I feel like there are endless possibilities.

These barrios need **help**. But in order for help to work, it must be done in certain ways. When gangs own the street, you can’t expect to solve violence with someone who isn’t trusted by the community and who hasn’t lived there their whole life. When police are corrupt, you can’t expect sending more police officers into an area to reduce crime. When there isn’t any education or resources provided by the government, you can’t expect people to *want* to change until they trust that the country is on their side… or at least until they can eat a good meal.

During the day at one point I started to think about Y Combinator and the startup mentality. So many people are so motivated to work their asses off to create some minimum viable product that is scalable and solves a problem. Y Combinator’s model is based off of the idea of ‘solving a problem’ that people *need* solved.

The problems that exist in the 1st world are a bit ridiculous in comparison to the problems that exist here. I know that the money only flows into the solutions for things like ecommerce or anti-spam… but I wish so badly that there was a way to make a viable revenue model for social impact projects.

The problems are there, the solutions aren’t easy but they exist, often times these solutions are even scalable… but unfortunately the revenue isn’t the same.

I want to keep researching ways to provide help and solutions to problems like micro-lending and anti-violence in places like agua blanca that can be monetized, not because I want money for myself, but because I want to attract people to work on these projects.

I know there has to be something here. Some missing piece of the puzzle.

Who knows, maybe this is what I’ll dedicate my life to researching for the next 5 years…. We shall see.

For now, I am still processing. Taking it all in, one bite at a time.

Germán introduced me to the cure violence guys as an ‘Americana Curiosa’

I like that.

I think I’ll stay curious for a while.

\*\*\* Colombian Quotes \*\*\*

“Crime is so much better now than it used to be! I haven’t even been robbed in 3 years!” - Julian

“In Colombia, you really live every day to the fullest because you literally don’t know if it’s going to be your last or not.” - David