

RIPPLES OF CHANGE IN HONDURAN COMMUNITIES

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“Each time a man stands up for an ideal, or acts to improve the lot of others, or strikes out against injustice, he sends forth a tiny ripple of hope, and crossing each other from a million different centers of energy and daring, those ripples build a current which can sweep down the mightiest walls of oppression and resistance.” **Robert Kennedy**

ABSTRACT

Electronic news media from around the world declare the problem: “Honduran migrant group treks north as US calls for tighter borders” (Palencia, 2018), and “Trump warns Honduras over migrant caravan now in Guatemala” (Perez, 2018). Thousands flee poverty and crime in Honduras to pursue the dream of a better life in the US; a life that few of these determined migrants will ever enjoy. While it is commendable that news outlets highlight this dire situation, few will publish stories of those who remain in Honduras, overcome the day-to-day challenges, and take steps to change their lives, the lives of family members, the lives of community members, and ultimately the country of Honduras. This community engagement portfolio fills a gap in the literature and in the global news media. This paper describes a portfolio of community engagement initiatives that begins at The Leadership Center in rural Honduras with ripples continuing out to communities across Honduras. Three graduates and two students of The Leadership Center serve as co-authors on this paper, telling their personal stories and the stories of their engagement in their communities.

COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT PORTFOLIO

The intent of this community engagement portfolio is to showcase the impact that The Leadership Center (TLC) has on bringing change to Honduran communities through the stories of students and graduates and the impact they are having on their communities and the members of those communities. Five students and graduates of The Leadership Center are co-authors on this paper. They tell their stories in their words, and they describe how they are engaged in their communities to make a difference in the lives of others.

A portfolio is a collection of items that are aligned or fit together in some way. An investment portfolio is the collection of investments held by an investor. A ministerial portfolio encompasses the responsibilities of a governmental minister or a member of a cabinet. A student portfolio is a collection of the work completed by a student over time. A community engagement portfolio encompasses activities undertaken to engage or develop one or more communities. This paper describes activities undertaken by five TLC students and graduates to engage and develop their

communities in rural Honduras and to touch the lives of community members.

Block (2008) describes community as the “experience of belonging” (p. xii). Whenever we find a place where we belong, we are part of a community. When we belong, we become part of that place. When we belong, we take on ownership responsibilities for that place; “to belong to a community is to act as a creator and co-owner of that community” (p. xii). Nouwen (2013) holds a similar view of community. In community, “I belong to you and you to me, and we to each other” (p. xxiii). In community, we encourage each other, we build each other up, and we work together to build up the broader community. This paper tells the stories of students and graduates of The Leadership Center doing exactly that in rural Honduran communities. These young women belong to their rural Honduran communities, and they demonstrate belonging by taking ownership for some aspect of community life.

Purpose

The umbrella purpose of the community engagement described in this paper is to empower young women, all of whom are citizens of Honduras and members of rural communities, to be change agents in their communities (Seeley, 2018). This purpose flows from the long term vision of Leadership Mission International, the non-profit organization that operates TLC: “That graduates will create long-term, sustainable solutions in their communities and country” (LMI, n.d.). The Leadership Center seeks to educate young Honduran women in English, leadership, and community development, preparing them to go into communities and organizations as ethical leaders and change agents. This paper describes some of the results of pursuing that purpose, presented in the form of specific instances of community engagement as described by the young women who are leaders in those specific instances of community engagement.

Context

The focal point for this community engagement portfolio is The Leadership Center, a tertiary-level educational institution located in rural Honduras. TLC is an educational project of Leadership Mission International (LMI), a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization. The mission of LMI is “to educate,

train, and develop a new generation of ethical leaders by providing exceptional academics and hands-on leadership opportunities to individuals from underprivileged families” (LMI, n.d.). TLC students are unmarried Honduran females who have graduated from high school and who do not have children. They study English, leadership, and community development. TLC administration is intentional about accepting qualified students who would not otherwise be able to continue their education at the university level due to lack of family resources.

Honduras, the country setting for the community engagement initiatives described in this paper, is the second poorest country in Central America (CIA, 2018). The economy of Honduras is heavily dependent on US aid and remittances (CIA). From 2001 through 2017, Honduras received \$1.625 billion in foreign aid from the United States (FAE, 2018). This does not include remittances from Hondurans living and working in the United States sent back to families in Honduras. The US House of Representatives has appropriated \$82.9 million in aid for Honduras for fiscal year 2018 (Meyer, 2018). In spite of this aid from the United States, more than 60% of the Honduran population lived in poverty in 2016, while in the rural areas, approximately 20% of the population lived in extreme poverty, or on less than US\$1.90 per day (WorldBank, 2018a). The per capita gross national income did increase from \$980 US in 2001 to \$2160 US in 2016 (WorldBank, 2018b). However, the share of income held by the lowest 20% of the population moved only slightly from 2.8% in 1990 to 3.2% in 2016 (DataBank, 2018). And, the national poverty headcount ratio, which is “the percentage of the population living below the national poverty lines” (WorldBank, 2018b), increased from 58.2% of the population in 2007 to 60.9% of the population in 2016. In spite of aid from the US and other countries, poverty remains a significant issue for Hondurans, especially for those living in rural areas.

The culture of Honduras raises many barriers for females. Honduras embodies the typically patriarchal society, commonly referred to as machismo, that can be found throughout Latin America (Lomot, 2013; Rowlands, 1997). Within such a society, men make all of the decisions: “the male population chooses when women become

pregnant, how many children they have, what their daily chores are, and how far their education goes” (Lomot, 2013, p. 15). The machismo culture “encourages men to dominate women and to aggressively exercise power and control” (Giordano, Thumme, & Sierra, 2009, p. 997). Women are expected to fit into their gender role of “wife-mother-maintainer of the home” resulting in “women carrying the burden of domestic and reproductive labor” (Rowlands, 1997, p. 34). Teen pregnancy and large families are typical in rural Honduras (Lomot, 2013; Rowlands, 1997). Accompanying the problem of teen pregnancy, domestic violence has “become prevalent throughout much of the country” (Lomot, 2013, p. 24). Girls and women caught in this machismo culture struggle with issues of fear, low self-confidence, and low self-esteem (Lomot, 2013; Rowlands, 1997). As a consequence, “Many women do not enter the workforce because they feel they cannot perform adequately” (Lomot, 2013, p. 24); the rate of female participation in the labor force is consistently lower than other Latin American countries. Girls and young women who live in cultures dominated by a machismo mindset, such as in Honduras, live in a world filled with discouragement (Seeley, 2017).

It is in this cultural context that The Leadership Center seeks to make a difference in communities and the culture by making a difference in the lives of young women from humble circumstances. The Leadership Center is having an impact on communities across Honduras through students and graduates. Twelve of 18 Honduran departments (states) are represented by the students and graduates of TLC. Students engage their communities when they return home on school breaks. Graduates engage the communities they move to after graduating from TLC. Figure 1 graphically depicts the engagement of TLC in communities across Honduras.

The leadership of TLC has been making a concerted effort to recruit students from all Honduran departments. The ultimate goal is to bring change to communities and organizations in every department through student and graduate engagement. Lasting change will come to Honduran communities when members of those communities, students and graduates of TLC, “Step forward to solve a problem, then move on to the next issue that needs addressing” (Wheatley & Frieze, 2011, p. 4).

Figure 1: Engagement of TLC across Honduras



Each of the authors of this community engagement portfolio has a unique story and background that has equipped them for their role in community engagement.

DR. SEELEY'S EXPERIENCE

I am a member of the community of learners that makes up The Leadership Center. I have made nine trips to Honduras since January 2015. I serve as a volunteer instructor and life coach at The Leadership Center in rural Honduras. My longest period of residence has been 11 weeks. I have the experience of belonging when I am in residence on campus, and I miss the TLC students and staff when I return to my home in Arizona. As Nouwen (2013) so powerfully put it, I belong to them and they belong to me and we belong to each other (p. xxiii). At the heart of community are mutual commitment, belonging, and ownership for the growth and development of all community members. My role in the TLC community is to educate students as change agents and leaders; to encourage them in their personal growth and development and in their community engagement activities; and to serve as a life coach and guide on their paths to become all that God created them to be.

God has prepared me well for the assignment He has given me in Honduras. I hold a PhD in Leadership, a professional certification in Change Management Leadership, an advanced diploma in Christian Life Coaching, and a master's level seminary degree. I have more than 20 years of experience leading change initiatives in major corporations. I have a passion to help individuals, organizations, and communities become more of whom and what God designed them to be. I shall continue to serve the Lord Jesus in this capacity as long as He enables me to do so.

LENIS GARCIA'S STORY

I was born in San Jose de Ramos, a small rural community near Cantarranas, in the department of Francisco Morazan, into a Christian family of seven members. German and Alejandrina are my parents, and Yulissa, Melissa, Eliezer and Ivis are my siblings. My mom was a housewife but also helped my dad, who is a farmer. As a girl from a low social status, I spent my childhood helping with the chores at home, such as doing dishes, sweeping, playing, and also going to elementary school. After my first six years of studies, my family moved to El Tomatin, another community closer to the town where there was a high school. The objective of moving was for my sister and I to continue to work and study. We did not have a defined place to stay until my mom's cousin decided to lend us his house. We worked on tomato, green pepper, corn, and bean crops before or after going to high school to make a living. It was difficult to get up every day and continue to try hard to go forward when I was exhausted. But I looked inside and saw the sacrifices my family was making for us to succeed, and I found motivation and hope of a better future.

Girls, just for the fact of being girls, face different challenges, especially if they are uneducated. They are treated as objects, servants, or just insignificant beings in society. Many families lived everyday just to make the living for one day. My family was no exception. I saw women just cooking, cleaning, and washing clothing all the time. I saw people taking advantage of women, and I experienced that too, in some ways. I heard people saying girls were meant to do what men said because men were the ones that provided for the family. Besides that, women who were from the bottom of society had no options. The house was their only destiny. I refused to believe that. I dreamed about getting a higher education than elementary school, and I was willing to work to achieve it.

Dreams for a girl seemed too much like fantasy. In my community, most girls didn't even have the opportunity to complete elementary school. Giving girls an opportunity to study was considered foolishness, a waste of resources. Sadly, it's still true for some girls. I heard it a lot. But all those negative ways of thinking about girls only grew in me a stronger desire to go further in education. Even though I didn't know how that was going to be accomplished, I saw myself not only working

for my family but helping more people by working with my profession. I would say I am lucky to have a family that has helped me and my siblings so that we can walk out of that cycle of poverty and ignorance they have faced even more than us.

In my family and my community there are different problems. I wanted to do something to find solutions to these problems, but I had no idea where to start. I heard about TLC and the opportunity to study community development and business there. I wanted to learn about it. So, I came to TLC. Education is important to live a better present and build a better future. I decided to study in high school and at TLC because I refused to live the same way my grandparents and my parents lived. And I believed women are capable of doing more than raising children or helping with the chores at home.

Before attending TLC, I was doing the chores at home waiting to be 18 years old to go to San Pedro Sula and look for a job. For a girl who just finished high school, with little or no experience, finding a good job is difficult. I would be stuck working for a factory in San Pedro Sula. I would not be able to study because the time is not enough to work at a factory, study, and do the chores at home. TLC has not only helped me grow intellectually, but I have strengthened my character. I have learned to be more courageous, and I've drawn closer to Jesus while being at TLC. As a result of studying at The Leadership Center, I started a small business and I also teach English.

I am grateful to God and many people for helping me achieve my goals. But even with the knowledge and experiences I've had, I still find myself in situations that I don't know what to do because I don't have all the skills or certification I need to work to solve some problems such as dental care problems or teaching for longer periods than a year, for example. Therefore, I am planning to start studying next year at UNAH (Autonomous University of Honduras). I want to gain more knowledge to be able to contribute more and better. While I work to achieve this goal, I want to work on community development projects such as seminars about nutrition, buccal hygiene, or about how to make jewelry and handicraft items. In addition, I want to expand the business for my family to have something to work on. That way they would help themselves. There is not a limit to learn and there

is not a limit to serve. We can do both.

MARY MALDONADO'S STORY

I grew up in Rio Negro, a community in the department of Comayagua but far away from the city; it is surrounded by beautiful mountains and an awesome landscape. Rio Negro is also a national park. This place is peaceful, relaxing, and interesting due to the stories the elderly people tell. Around 70 families live in the community and are dedicated to farming. Some families work with coffee farms and also plant corn, beans, and some vegetables. Most of the people work their own land. The people there are united and they help each other. We have a primary school, Catholic Church, Evangelic Church, and a soccer field. This community is blessed with electricity and is a producer of water. More than 60 other communities and the larger city of Comayagua are beneficiaries of the water provided from Rio Negro. My community is my favorite place in Honduras, not just because of its natural beauty but also the kindness and humble way of life of the people. Here we can feel closer to God and His creation.



The natural beauty of Rio Negro

I grew up in a humble family of seven members. I have two brothers and two sisters. I am the youngest. As is true for many children in Honduras, I had a wonderful childhood. I used to spend much time playing with the other children and reading

old books that I found at home, even when I didn't know how to read. When I was six years old, my parents sent me to school. I was excited because I was going to learn how to read and write. After some months I achieved my goal. When I was 12 years old, I finished my primary school. At that age I had seen many girls who got married or got pregnant after school. I didn't want that for myself, so I asked my parents if I could go to high school, but at that time my older sister was studying. My parents told me that I had to wait until my sister finished high school. I had to accept the reality and wait two years to go to high school. During those two years I didn't have a lot to do, so I decided to play soccer with the women's soccer team in my community. It was a great time, but I couldn't forget my dream to continue studying. After the two years, someone talked to my parents about a high school that was about two hours from my community. It was a program of distance education, but it was an opportunity for me. I decided to apply for that school, and I was accepted. Many people told me that studies were not for girls in rural areas, and the best thing I could do was get married and have children, as all the girls of my age normally do in my community. It was challenging for me because I had to face many people and tell them that I didn't want to get married like the other girls did. Many of them told my parents that they were just wasting their money and in the end it would not be worth it. But I was firm in my decision to go to high school to get a degree, so I went, I studied hard, and I graduated from high school. After high school, I still wanted to continue studying, but my parents didn't have more money to pay for university. I knew about TLC through a friend who told me about the place and the things that The Leadership Center is doing. It sounded interesting, and I decided to apply to TLC to continue studying. I didn't want to give up because I wanted a different life for myself. I want a life of opportunities; I want to learn about new places and to meet new people. I want to make a change in my community and to change the expectations that people have about young girls in rural areas.

The Leadership Center has impacted my life in a huge way because I am able to see the world in a different way. I changed my way of thinking, and I do different things than I used to do. Now I know how to help people without harming them (Corbett

& Fikkert, 2012) and also how to be useful for the people around me. I am helping the people from my community with meetings and teaching them how to do things by themselves. I started a book club that brings many girls together to meet each other and change their lives. I am visiting homes and giving people a word of hope for their lives, especially the elderly and young people. I am working with the *patronato* (town council) from my community to create plans that will help our community to make a change. I have a lot of work to do and many challenges to face, but I don't feel afraid because I know the education that I am receiving at TLC is giving me the necessary tools to face it.

I have been a dreamer since I was a child. At TLC I learned that it is good to have goals and dreams because they keep us fighting for those things we want to achieve. I have many aspirations that I want to achieve. My ultimate desire is to serve others and to work with those people from isolated places in Honduras and around the world and together create new possibilities for advancement and development. I seek to become an example of leadership for young women in my community and in Honduras. Someday I want to have my own business and praise God through it. One of my goals is to have my own farm and through it to provide employment for women in my community and communities around it. I have a dream to learn more languages and to never stop learning.

NORBENTINA ALVAREZ OSORNO'S STORY

I am originally from Gracias a Dios, also known as La Mosquitia, a department on the coast of Honduras. I am the youngest of five siblings, and my father died when I was two years old. My mother remarried after a year, and I grew up thinking my step-father was my blood father until I was nine years old. All my memories as a girl between the years of three and nine are very normal for the life of many children in my community. I played, helped at home with cleaning, did the dishes, and sometimes helped sell things. During this time, I saw many of my cousins become mothers at an early age and take over adult responsibilities. For them and other girls in my community, this was their life goal: turn 15, have a husband, kids, and become housewives. I heard many of the adults say the girls were to be home, be mothers and wives, and take care of their families. The girls were in

charge of the house, to do the cooking, cleaning, and take care of their youngest siblings; all these chores were going to prepare them for their future as young wives and mothers. For me it was normal to see girls 13, 14, and 15 years old become mothers. There were many times as a young girl that I played with my cousins pretending to be mothers; we saw that as a normal thing. Our games were about the things happening around us.

But my mother had a different goal for us. She did not want us to get married at 15 as she did. She wanted us to study and have more opportunities than what we had in our community. During this time, we had to move three times from my community to the city back and forth, looking to study, until we settled down in Trujillo, where we are currently living.

Moving to the city of Trujillo and continuing my education was a mind-changing experience for me. I had the opportunity to see and learn many things that helped me understand the power of education and how that was going to change my life in the long run. I wanted to be like my teachers, have a classroom with many children, and teach them about history and all the things I was being taught. As I grew a little older, I started to have interest in learning other languages and wanted to be a bilingual secretary. However, my parents could not afford to pay for me to study this career, and I was too young to enroll for this career anyway. While I was in high school, my step-dad passed away. During this time, my mother encouraged me the most to finish my education. After finishing high school, I studied to become a teacher. My mother's support gave me the strength to finish school. After graduating, I looked for a job, but I kept the mindset of enrolling back in school to complete a college degree. My desire was to reward my mother for her support and all she did to help me finish my studies. I started as a volunteer at Little Hands, Big Hearts Foundation, and after a year they hired me as an assistant teacher for pre-school at the Foundation. After two years of work, my boss recommended me to study at TLC. I did not know much about the program, but the idea of studying again made me really excited and I decided to apply.

Being at TLC was one of the greatest experiences in my life. I learned so much and can say that it helped me become the person I am today.

I tend to be a shy person and did not like taking leadership roles. I could not picture myself doing public speaking in a different language or leading projects, organizing meetings with local authorities, or participating in conferences about health, NGOs, education, or things like that. At TLC, I learned that I can do many things and help others even by doing small things. My teachers, staff, classmates, the director, and everyone that I met at TLC, and the different activities and classes I took, helped me believe in myself—that I have a voice that can be used to do good for others. I realized that there were many things I could accomplish if I worked hard. I was not raised to be a voiceless house wife and mother, a woman who does not participate in decision making in her house, community, or other places. I can do and accomplish more than what the society in my culture teaches us as women.

I enjoy what I am doing in my current job as Director of External Operations at Little Hands, Big Hearts Foundation; being able to serve the community and the families served by the Foundation is something wonderful. My heart is full of joy every time we do something to help the children and families; therefore, I want to continue studying and get a degree in human resources, project management, or degree that allows me to work with communities and families in need. I want to get involved with organizations that lead projects to improve the life of communities and their members.

KAREN RAMIREZ'S STORY

I grew up in a small community called San Jose de Comayagua, in the department of Comayagua. I am the fourth of seven children. I went to elementary school, and when it was time for me to go to high school my parents did not have enough money to send me to traditional high school because they were supporting my two older sisters. So, I went to a non-traditional high school where I did not have to wear a uniform and I just had to go once a week. But in my heart I did not want to go there because I wanted to learn more by going to high school every day as my sisters did. So, I did seventh and eighth grade in that high school because I did not have options. When it was time for me to go to ninth grade, I told my parents that I did not want to continue in the non-traditional high school I was in because I wanted to learn more, but they told

me that they couldn't send me to the traditional high school because they didn't have money to buy a uniform or notebooks. So even though my parents told me I was going to continue in the non-traditional school, I told my school director that I was not going to continue there because I was going to the traditional high school. When my mom went to do the enrollment for the next year, the school director told my mom that I couldn't continue there because they had taken all my documentation out and there was no more space for me. My mom didn't understand because my parents had told me that I had to continue there. I was strong in my opinion, and I told my parents that I was going to go to the traditional high school, and that I was going to pay for my uniform and notebooks. And that is what I did. I picked coffee and saved the money to buy what I needed. I finished my remaining four years of high school in the traditional school, wearing the same uniform the whole time.

From the time I was very young, I worked picking coffee. My siblings and I used to walk two or three hours to get to the place where we picked coffee. I learned how difficult it was for my dad to make money to support the family, so I never gave up. I wanted to support my family, but also I wanted to be an educated person. I always knew that education was very important. That is why I decided to finish high school despite all the obstacles I had on my way.

From the time I was very young, I wanted to go to university, but I knew that it was very expensive to go there because I had to move to the city, rent an apartment, buy my food, and so forth, and I couldn't afford that. But I never gave up. I kept looking for opportunities until I heard about The Leadership Center. I looked for people to tell me more about it until I found the right person who gave me information and told me what I had to do to apply to TLC. I applied, and I got accepted. TLC changed my life; it taught me to fight even harder for what I want. TLC taught me that even though I am a woman, I can reach my dreams and goals. By being at TLC, I have learned what I want to achieve and what I want for the future. I want to follow what God wants me to do, and TLC has helped me to see those things. When I was about to graduate, TLC offered me a job as Director of Students. I decided to accept it because I knew that TLC was an opportunity for me to help other

people, especially women, which is my passion.

By being at TLC, I have had many opportunities to grow as a person and as a leader. In 2016, I had the opportunity to go to Canada to a youth conference called One Young World. "One Young World is the forum for young leaders from every country in the world and provides a platform for their stories to be told in international, regional and local media" (One, 2018). I applied for and received a scholarship to attend One Young World Summit 2016 as a representative from Honduras. The conference was very interesting as I met young leaders from all over the world. We met and discussed social problems and how we as young people and leaders could contribute to those issues in our countries.

ELIDA FLORENTINA SIERRA SOLÓRZANO'S STORY

I was born in Tegucigalpa, the capital city of Honduras, in the department of Francisco Morazán. I lived in Tegucigalpa with my family until I was five years old, when my parents decided to move to the mountains. That was a little difficult for me because I wasn't accustomed to life in a rural community. It did take me some time to get used to living in a small, rural community. But I have now spent the majority of my life in that community, which is called Nuevos Horizontes, Santa Maria, in the department of El Paraíso.

When I was six years old, I started school and began to make friends there; school and friends were my favorite things when I was a child. Also, thanks to God, I have wonderful parents who always support me. When I was a child they helped me with my homework. From the time I was a child my parents have been teaching me different things such as how to work, values, and about God as well. In addition, when I was 11 years old, my family and I decided to move to another school because I was interested in studying in high school and I felt that the teacher in my first school wasn't teaching very well. I had to move to another community to attend a different school. This was so difficult for me at first because I had never before lived outside of my home. When I started high school, my family decided to move to the city of Danli because my oldest brother and I were interested in continuing our studies. The community we lived in didn't have a high school, so that meant that we didn't have the opportunity to study there. My family moved to Danli so we could attend high school. Growing up

wasn't difficult for me because my family always took good care of me. My parents have always helped me when I need to make a decision.

For me, education is one thing that is very important in life, and for that reason I decided to continue studying in high school. Also, education gives us more opportunities such as work, travel, and the opportunity to learn new things. I decided to study at The Leadership Center because I really want to learn new things that will help me to be a better person in the future. Also, I really want to help my community by doing different activities. As a good leader, that means that I can help my community to solve the problems they are facing now. One of my dreams for my community is to support young people by helping to find opportunities for them. This dream can be difficult to achieve, but with God everything will be okay.

I am so happy that I am learning new and interesting things at TLC that will help me in the future to be a good leader. I know I can put the things I am learning into practice in my community. Now that I am studying at TLC, I can see that women have power, and we can do whatever we want to do. I can also see that the girls that are studying at TLC are working for the same goal, which is about bringing change to our country to make it a better place. I am so thankful to God for the opportunity that I have to study at The Leadership Center, because now I know that women are so valued and strong. I have learned new things that can help others to be better. I have learned that we women can do many things.

During the time that I have been at TLC, I have discovered that helping others is one of the things that I love to do. When I am at TLC, I have the opportunity to help my friends in different ways. I also have the opportunity to discover new skills and abilities. All of those things are really helping me, because when I am on vacation I have the opportunity to share with others the things that I am learning at TLC. Another thing that I learned at The Leadership Center is to have a close relationship with God. This is one of the things that I am so excited to do because God is the most important thing in the world.

Each of these young leaders took what she learned at The Leadership Center back to her community, applied a process of change, and engaged others in the community in that process of change, for the betterment of community members

and the community.

PROCESS

The foundational process employed in the examples of community engagement described in this article is straightforward: understand a need or something that is lacking in the community, consider some options for meeting the need, choose a place to start, and then take the steps necessary to implement the selected option. A community member is in the best position to observe the need and determine where to start. A community member typically enters the engagement with a reserve of goodwill and positive relationships. The situation and the need belong to the community (Myers, 2011). The story belongs to community members and a member of the community is best suited to engage in changing and improving the story. While someone from outside the community may have something to offer to the community, the most successful community engagement comes from inside the community. Myers (2011) is on target when he points out that when outsiders try to intervene in the community's story they add to the poverty of the poor (p. 174). Easterly (2006) concurs with this perspective, pointing out that "it is easier to search for solutions to your own problems than to those of others" (p. 345).

Definition of Terms

For the purposes of this article, the phrase "community engagement" is used interchangeably with the more widely used phrase "community development." There are many definitions of community engagement. One helpful definition comes from the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention (CDC), as quoted in a publication by the National Institutes of Health (NIH) (2011):

...the process of working collaboratively with and through groups of people affiliated by geographic proximity, special interest, or similar situations to address issues affecting the well-being of those people. It is a powerful vehicle for bringing about environmental and behavioral changes that will improve the health of the community and its members. It often involves partnerships and coalitions that help mobilize resources and influence systems, change relationships among partners, and serve as catalysts for changing policies, programs, and practices (p. 7).

A more succinct definition comes from the

UK Homes and Communities Agency (HCA, 2014): "community engagement is simply defined as involving the people that live in your area with local redevelopment." Community engagement is the process of involving community members to solve a problem or address an issue; it is undertaken to make a positive change in the community.

Goals of Community Engagement

The broader goal of the community engagement described in this paper is to live into the vision of LMI—"That graduates will create long-term, sustainable solutions in their communities and country" (LMI, n.d.). Students and graduates are prepared through their educational program and are encouraged to go back to their communities as leaders and agents of change to engage members of their community to bring about positive change.

Each instance of community engagement described in this portfolio has a specific goal aligned to the needs of the community served. For example, the goal Lenis had in starting VALE Store was to meet the demand for shoes and clothing in the town of Villa de San Francisco at a price point the residents of that community could afford. The goal that Karen and her co-founders had in starting Women with Purpose was to help women understand that they are capable of much more than what the culture tells them. The goal that Mary had in starting a book club for girls and young women in Rio Negro was to give girls and young women a way to continue learning even though they did not have the opportunity to attend high school. Elida decided to start projects in Nuevos Horizontes Danli el Paraiso because she has a deep desire to help her community to develop and to teach community members that everything is possible if they work together. The goal Norbentina and her colleagues at Little Hands, Big Hearts had in embarking on the construction of a therapeutic playground was to provide special needs children a safe and secure play area that not only serves as a learning experience, but is also designed to change their perceptions of open space and their interactions with other children. In each of these examples, these young leaders stepped beyond their culturally-defined role as women to implement a new model of profound social change that relies on "mutuality, trust, and friendship" (Wheatley & Frieze, 2011, p. 178). As Wheatley and Frieze (2011) so eloquently put it, "The pattern

here is simple: People see something in their world that needs to change, and they step forward to take that first action” (p. 223). That is precisely what my co-authors did in their communities.

Methods

The community engagement portfolio presented in this paper falls into the Boyer function of the scholarship of application. At the core of The Leadership Center is the development of a new approach for dealing with a problem of practice. Specifically, The Leadership Center takes a different approach to addressing the problems associated with lack of resources in rural communities and engagement with those communities.

Why does poverty remain a significant issue for Hondurans, especially for those living in rural areas, in spite of the significant amount of aid that comes from the US and other countries? In his treatise on international aid and development, Easterly (2006) compares and contrasts the traditional approach to international aid and development with an alternative approach driven by change agents. He uses the term “Planners” for the practitioners and advocates of the traditional approach, and the term “Searchers” for change agents that follow a different approach to engaging communities in the process of change and development (pp. 3-30). Easterly’s analysis sheds light on the failure of international aid and development efforts, and may help explain why poverty remains such a significant issue in spite of significant amounts of aid. It also helps to shine a light on the new approach to the problems of poverty and community development that is being taken by The Leadership Center.

Easterly’s (2006) comparative analysis of the

approaches taken by Planners and Searchers is summarized in Table 1.

The last point of comparison is a key to understanding both the failure of the traditional approach to international aid and development, as practiced by both government agencies and many non-governmental organizations (NGOs), and the different approach taken by The Leadership Center and many smaller NGOs. In much of international aid and development, the giver of aid determines what the problem is, what the solution should be, and how the aid should be applied. Communities become dependent on the giver of aid, waiting for guidance and direction regarding what to do and how to do it, or waiting for the giver of aid to actually do something. The price to be paid by community members for their dependency on aid organizations is a sense of helplessness (Block, 1987; Myers, 2011).

However, in the non-traditional approach, the Searcher analyzes the problem with the insight of an insider and determines what the solution needs to be based on that insider knowledge. Searchers display autonomy, “The attitude that my actions are my own choices” (Block, 1987, p. 16). Autonomy puts the Searcher “in the center and in charge of what is happening” (p. 16). Searchers become the instigator, the cause, of the change. Community members are their own best Searchers (Easterly, 2006, p. 27). Each of the stories of community engagement told by my co-authors provides support for this assertion. Each of the solutions described in these stories “is just one creative response to a particular problem” (Easterly, 2006, p. 14). In each of these situations, the young leaders saw something in their communities that needed

Table 1 Summarized Comparison of Approaches Taken by Planners and Searchers

Approach of Planners	Approach of Searchers
Have good intentions but don't motivate anyone to carry out those intentions	Find things that work
Raise expectations but don't take responsibility for meeting those expectations	Accept responsibility for their actions
Determine what to supply	Find out what is needed, what is in demand, then supply it
Apply global blueprints with hopes they will work locally	Adapt to local conditions
Thinks he (or she) already knows the answers	Admits he (or she) doesn't know the answers in advance; hopes to find answers by experimenting with different possible solutions
“A Planner believes outsiders know enough to impose solutions” (Easterly, 2006, p. 6).	“A Searcher believes only insiders have enough knowledge to find solutions, and that most solutions must be homegrown” (p. 6).

to change and they stepped forward to take needed action (Wheatley & Frieze, 2011, p. 223). Wheatley and Frieze (2011) provide insight into this last point of comparison:

However well intentioned the intervention might be, it is always rooted in the belief that people need help, they can't help themselves, and it is our duty to 'interrupt' their experience on their behalf. Perhaps nowhere more so than in international development has the notion of benevolent intervention been so broadly embraced, under the moniker of 'aid' (p. 170).

While the Board of Directors of Leadership Mission International (the NGO that operates The Leadership Center), student sponsors, donors, and the TLC staff all believe that people in rural Honduras need help, they certainly do not believe that they can't help themselves. And they do not accept the position that it is our duty to interrupt their experience on their behalf. Instead, The Leadership Center prepares, encourages, and empowers young women to help themselves and their communities.

The Leadership Center plays a distinctive role in community engagement in rural Honduras. TLC is a tertiary-level educational institution. Young Honduran women from under-resourced communities around Honduras come to TLC to learn English, and to be educated as ethical leaders and as change agents. They learn the tools, techniques, and philosophy of community development. TLC does not bring the mayor, members of the town council of the community (the *patronato*), or the members of prominent families from the community to campus to teach them leadership. Instead, TLC takes the unique approach of bringing young women from humble families to campus as students. And in the machismo culture of rural Honduras, these young women are second class citizens (Lomot, 2013; Rowlands, 1997). Most, if not all, of the young women who come to TLC as students would not have any possibility of continuing their education after high school. TLC educates and prepares these young Honduran women to engage their communities as Searchers.

But TLC is much more than just an educational institution. It serves as a haven of encouragement and hope for the young women who study there.

TLC is a community of learners. It is a community of Hondurans and non-Hondurans dedicated to helping each other become all that God intends them to be. It is an environment and a context designed to encourage young women to pursue their goals and their dreams, much needed in a society that discourages young women from pursuing their goals and their dreams and tells them that they are not capable of achieving their goals and reaching their dreams simply because they are women (Seeley, 2017). It is a setting in which young women who come from backgrounds of little are prepared and encouraged to pursue more for themselves, their families, their communities, their churches, and their country. The Leadership Center is a launching pad from which young women can go out to engage their communities. The Leadership Center prepares young leaders, which the Berkana Institute defines as “anyone who wants to help, who is willing to step forward to create change in their world” (Wheatley, 2007, p. 292). This definition fits the young leaders of rural Honduras who serve as my co-authors on this paper.

Encouragement is an extremely important element in the process of helping young women from humble circumstances transform into leaders and change agents who will engage communities and organizations across Honduras. The combination of education in leadership and community development and the encouragement to become a leader and change agent is a potent force for change. Maxwell (2008) eloquently describes the process of encouragement:

To encourage people is to help them gain courage they might not otherwise possess—courage to face the day, to do what's right, to take risks, to make a difference. And the heart of encouragement is to communicate a person's value. When we help people feel valuable, capable, and motivated we sometimes see their lives change forever—and then see them go on to change the world (p. 9).

The combination of education in leadership and community development and the encouragement to become a leader and change agent also leads to empowerment, “giving others the power to take action” (Ginnodo, 1997, p. 9). According to Conger (1989), empowerment can be thought of as “the

act of strengthening an individual's beliefs in his or her sense of effectiveness" (p. 18). Words of encouragement are one source of empowerment. The experience of studying within the community of learners at The Leadership Center empowered my co-authors to go back to their communities as leaders and change agents and to engage community members in the process of making things better, in spite of what the culture says about women.

The community engagement initiatives that flow out from The Leadership Center are the outcomes of helping young women gain the courage to engage their communities as leaders and change agents. The lives of these young leaders are being changed and they are going on to change their world.

OUTCOMES

This paper describes a portfolio of community engagement initiatives that begins at The Leadership Center with ripples continuing out to communities across Honduras. The Leadership Center is the epicenter of this community engagement. As noted previously in this paper, the mission of LMI is "to educate, train, and develop a new generation of ethical leaders by providing exceptional academics and hands-on leadership opportunities to individuals from underprivileged families" (LMI, n.d.). As of March 2019, when the most recent graduating class was sent out into communities and organizations across Honduras, 65 young Honduran women have graduated from TLC since it was founded in 2011 (LMI, 2018). There were 35 young women on campus as students at the time this paper was being written. Positive impact in the lives and communities of 100 young Honduran women is a noteworthy outcome.

Students become involved with community engagement from their first school vacation, which occurs between their first and second academic quarters. Students are encouraged to engage their communities by the TLC staff and leaders. They hear about community engagement from other students. They get ideas about how to engage their communities by listening to the types of engagement activities other students have undertaken. Periodically, staff and students go out together on weekends to engage local communities. For example, Dr. Seeley has gone with students to a community high in the mountains

to distribute clothing to families in need and to pick up trash from the roads in that community. And, all students participate in a community development project as part of their curriculum. In support of the vision of Leadership Mission International, community engagement is a part of the DNA of The Leadership Center.

Each of the community engagement initiatives described by the leader of that initiative is an outcome of the culture of community engagement that permeates The Leadership Center. All of these community engagement initiatives are at the sweet spot of what is intended in a community engagement portfolio, which "focuses specifically on off-campus community engagement projects" (Greenberger & Mandernach, 2018, p. 4).

The Leadership Center (Karen Ramirez, Director of Students)

I love my job at TLC because I am helping women, and as I said before, I love doing so. I am basically in charge of students. I help them with the transition from their homes to TLC. I assist them when they are sick. I am the person they go to when they need something. There are many things that I do here that I can't even mention one by one. I am also in charge of the communication between sponsors and students. I make sure sponsors and students communicate. The communication between sponsors and students is mostly based on encouragement and also building relationships. It is great for the students to stay in communication with their sponsors because that way they can be encouraged. This is so important since in our culture it is not common to get words of encouragement. The sponsors do a great job at this, which I know the students appreciate a lot.

The students who come to TLC are young women who have the desire to help their families and communities, young women who are passionate about making changes in their lives and in their communities. They are people who don't want to continue seeing injustice toward other people. I love working at TLC because I know the heart of the students and I know their desire to keep going. My greatest pleasure is to see the students achieve their goals and dreams. I love to see the students fighting for what they want in their lives and in the lives of others. I feel so excited when I think about all the students that have gone through this program, and it makes me feel very happy when I

know I have helped them go through this process. There have been more than 40 girls that I have helped and at the same time they have helped me and taught me a lot of things. When the students graduate from TLC, I know they are empowered to achieve their goals and to be the change agents in their home communities or wherever they are developing themselves as leaders of Honduras. When I see the students from TLC, I see strong women who will achieve their goals and dreams without fear of the adversities. TLC has impacted my life the same way it has impacted the life of the students, and the same way it will impact the life of many more young Honduran women.

Teaching English (Lenis Garcia, English Instructor and Tutor at The Leadership Center)

I taught English at a private school in a town called Villa de San Francisco, a smaller community near Cantarranas, in the department of Francisco Morazan. Teaching English to children and teenagers was a challenging experience. At the same time, it was a good opportunity to grow. Teaching children is more than lecturing for them to learn how to read and write; it's strengthening their moral values and listening to them talk about what worries or makes them happy, about their fears and their dreams. Likewise, the same is true for tutoring English at TLC. It's more than learning English, reviewing the class, or practicing a certain topic; it's an opportunity to encourage each other and to relate with the students when they feel discouraged, overwhelmed, or scared to go and work in their communities, and to set or work to reach our goals. I am a young Honduran woman, and I have been a student. I know we are here for an important reason. We want to be part of a positive change in our lives and the lives of people in our communities. I enjoy being a resource teacher at TLC. The small changes that I see happening in Honduras as a result of the education at TLC motivates me to work hard every day.

VALE Store, Villa de San Francisco (Lenis Garcia, Entrepreneur & Owner)

After three years of study, I graduated from TLC and started a small business, VALE Store. It's a second-hand clothing and shoe store. I decided to start this kind of business in Villa de San Francisco due to the increasing demand for shoes and clothing in the town. Villa de San Francisco is

a neighbor town of Cantarranas, in the department of Francisco Morazan. It has a population of approximately 3,000 people. The greatest source of work for people in this area is a sugar company that employs people in their offices or plantations of sugar cane. VALE Store operated in Villa de San Francisco for 25 months. Starting a business is exciting, but the idea of stepping out to compete in the market is also a little bit scary. But once the business is running, every experience helps to gain more understanding and confidence about doing it. By being in business, I didn't just learn how to sell items but also learned a lot about people. I've met nice people. I've listened to people who just want someone to hear them talking about their burdens that overwhelm them. And I've had to deal with violent people who tried to steal and do harm to my mom and me. It might seem too difficult and not gratifying to do. But when people came to the store and got what they needed, they smiled and went



home satisfied. To see this feels good.

Ms. Garcia and Dr. Seeley with one of Ms. Garcia's English students outside of VALE Store in the summer of 2016

VALE Store is currently operating in a little bit different manner. It's not in Villa de San Francisco anymore. It's in El Tomatin where my parents live. My mom is selling there. My father takes clothes and shoes to my aunt's house in San Jose de Ramos so that she can sell there as well. I am in charge of the administration. It makes me happy to know that even though VALE Store is still a small business, it's helping more people, not only me. That's the best part of being in business.

Women with Purpose (Karen Ramirez, Co-Founder)

I started the group Women with Purpose with two of my classmates because of our passion to help women. I want women to learn that they can achieve their goals in the same way I have achieved my goals. I want women to understand that they have a purpose in their lives and they are powerful.

Another reason we created the group Women with Purpose was to be proactive about making a change in our country. As a group we give seminars to women and we teach them to make jewelry and other things so that they can earn money. These types of projects help women to empower themselves, and that is the goal. We want to encourage women because we live in a machismo culture where there are not very many opportunities for women; the opportunities are just for men. We also live in a culture where men think that women are incapable to do meaningful things; men expect women to be working the whole time at home and taking care of the children. These are the types of things that we want to stop! We want women to see that they are capable of doing so much more despite what other people say.



The author and other members of Women with Purpose teaching women in a rural community to make jewelry

Book Club in Rio Negro (Mary Maldonado, TLC Student)

After being at The Leadership Center, I realized many young girls face a lack of opportunities, yet they wish to continue learning. I decided to start a book club for young girls in my home community of Rio Negro, because I knew in that way they could continue learning even though they didn't have the opportunity to attend high school. I was afraid at

the beginning because I know their parents and they are strict and not easy to approach. I had to convince their parents to trust in me and allow their teenagers to be part of the book club. It was difficult, but after a while they started to trust in me and be more flexible with their girls. The idea came to my mind when I saw their need for an education to improve their lives. Through the book club I have an opportunity not just to read with them but also teach them things they are interested in learning, such as baking, making jewelry, and other skills. I share with them seminars about self-esteem, God, friendships, and how to get along with and trust in their parents. I spend a lot of time with them when I am at home on vacations, and now they see me as their friend and someone who they can look for if they need something.

I started the book club with six young girls ranging in age between 12 and 18 years old. Two of these girls moved to another community and couldn't continue in the book club. After that a girl came to my house to ask me if she could be part of the book club. She and another girl joined us, and I still have six girls in the book club. At the beginning, the girls used to come to my house and we shared food, coffee, cookies, and so forth. Last vacation I took a different approach. Instead of the girls coming to my house, we went to their houses and shared with them and their families. While the girls and I were reading, their parents and siblings joined us in the book club. It was a beautiful experience because now not only the girls are involved, but their families as well. I hope next vacation boys and girls can join us and continue growing the book club.

I started the book club by giving a seminar and encouraging them to read the Bible the following vacation. TLC and a kind donor helped me to acquire more books for the book club. Now the girls have great books to read and more opportunities to increase their knowledge. They meet every two weeks to talk about the books and the things they are learning. Two vacations ago we went to help the teachers at the school of our community and we were reading with the children. Now, the girls are visiting the school every Friday, teaching the small children how to read, and helping the children who can read to grow in that area. Also, they are visiting homes and giving me ideas of what community projects I should undertake on my next vacation.

Something that started as a small but meaningful idea has been growing and changing the lives of those young women who did not have the opportunity to go to a high school and get an education. Nobody believed in these girls and young women simply because they are females. These young women didn't have the right to dream about a better future and better opportunities. These girls and young women previously lived in their own worlds without permission to go out and discover by themselves the world of others. These girls and young women didn't have friends because of mistakes made in the past; they felt far away from other teenagers and their own families. Now all of them have the opportunity to achieve their goals, pursue their dreams, and discover that outside of their bubble there is a world waiting for them. Through reading, they are learning, traveling to other places and time periods, and learning about God; they have opportunities and are making their dreams come true, all through a book. The book club has impacted their lives in a huge way; in a way that is difficult for me to describe. But the changes that I have noticed in them are bigger than before. They are sisters, friends, neighbors, teammates, and most of all, the precious creation of God. They have already understood it, and they are making changes in their lives, in their families, and in their community. Thanks to the book club these girls are getting along very well, supporting each other, and being an example for the community to follow. They have a voice now and nobody can stop them and tell them that they cannot do it because they know who they are, how valuable they are, and they can do whatever they want because they are strong and they have the same value as everybody else. They have learned those things through reading and spending time with each other.



The author reading to students at a school in Rio Negro

Community Engagement in Nuevos Horizontes Danli el Paraiso (Elida Florentina Sierra Solórzano, TLC Student)

The name of my community is Nuevos Horizontes Danli el Paraiso. My community is small; only 125 people total live there—woman, children, young people, and men. The majority of the members in the community have coffee farms. The people of the community earn their living by producing and selling coffee. They depend on the production of coffee for the money they need to buy food and the other necessities of life. In my community there is just one primary school for the children. There is no secondary school. However, the community has a significant asset—the people from my community help each other.

Helping others is the thing that I love doing; this is what motivates me to help in my community. I also decided to get involved and to work with others because I would like to make a change in my country and to teach people that we can change as a family because we are a family in God's eyes. My inspiration to do that is my dad because he is my example at home. He is always reminding me that there are people around me that really need my help. So I will try to give my best to continue helping others.



The author and her father working together

My inspiration to continue doing things for my future is my family, because they are always reminding me that I can do everything I want to do. I have different dreams and goals for my future. I know that it can be difficult to achieve all the things that I want to achieve, but I know that with God nothing is impossible because He is with me and He is always helping me and showing me His love. Working with my community is one of my inspirations as well, because I want to help them to develop and to have more opportunities for themselves. I hope that this can be possible. I am always hopeful because I know that God is with me and thanks to Him I am strong and I am Elida.

I decided to do projects in my community because I really want to help my community to develop, and to teach people in my community that everything is possible if we work together and we work hard. I have worked on different projects with people in my community. One project was to build the fence in the school. I started this project sharing the idea with the teacher and some people from my community. We then held a meeting to share the idea with the whole community. During that meeting we discussed why it was important to do this project and how this project would benefit the community. We also discussed what we need to do to achieve this project. Thanks to God the meeting was successful. Twelve community members worked for two days on the construction of the fence. Together we achieved our goal. This was the first project that community members and I did together; it was a wonderful experience for me. Each vacation when I am at home I go to the school to help the teacher teach the children. I love to do that because I love spending time with children. My favorite thing is to talk and to play with children. I also enjoy asking them about their goals and dreams for the future. I really like that because I can hear about their dreams and I can encourage them.



Community members working together on the fence

I see many needs in my community, including the need for clean water, a health center, a kindergarten, and a church. I think that if we work hard all the things that we want to achieve will be possible, but we need to trust in God first. Right now I am interested to work with the community to find ways we can achieve all of those things. I am also interested to find opportunities for women and young people because there aren't opportunities to work or to learn things that can help them in the future. I have a lot of work to do in my community, but I hope and trust that with God's help we will achieve all our goals.



The author leading a seminar at the community school

Serving Special Needs Children and Their Families
(Norbertina Alvarez Osorno, Director of External Operations at Little Hands, Big Hearts (LHBH) Foundation, Honduras)

I have been working in my current position since graduating from TLC in 2016. My role is to help lead the Foundation through its external operations. My responsibilities include:

- Working with the families (home visits, evaluate, and help solve needs)

- Governmental relationship, media, and external communication (newsletter, TV, radio, social media, photos, and children's stories)
- Bank runs and mission groups (contacts, work projects, orientation, and activities)
- Foundation meetings (attend meeting, conferences, and keep contact with board members)
- Community relationship (sponsors, social groups, Rotary Club, and patronatos)
- Church relations (teens, outreach, church involvement, and activities)

LHBH is a non-governmental ministry that serves the communities surrounding Trujillo, in the department of Colón. The primary ministry focus is on children, especially those with special needs. We are currently helping more than 165 children through our different programs. Since its founding in 1998, LHBH has helped about 500 families in a variety of ways, including construction of houses, pilas (a trough or large sink) to collect water, toilets, roofs, and so forth, as well as the indirect help the Foundation has provided to the Trujillo community and its members.

The Foundation has different programs that seek to help the children from the Trujillo community, as well as children from surrounding communities. Two of our programs are focused on special education and rehabilitation to help children with neurological illnesses. We currently have 42 children in these programs, which were created to help improve life for these children and their family members.

We help each child in different ways, depending on the need they have. We do rehabilitation with those children who have cerebral palsy or other conditions that prevent them from walking, sitting, speaking, and so forth. We provide education for those children that can go to school but need assistance to achieve at level in their classes. We want each child to have the opportunity to have a healthy and happy life, to grow, and to learn to do things on their own. And for those that don't have this same chance to learn to do things, we want to show them the love of Jesus and make them as happy as we can during the time they are with us. Most of our families have very few resources, with no education, and only one parent at home.

Our community Bible Class Hour focuses on reaching all the children from the community to teach about God and His love for each one of us. We motivate them to study and to have goals for things they want to accomplish. Our intention is to keep them from getting involved in drugs and doing bad things. Every year we deliver 130 backpacks and school supplies to help them enroll in school so they continue with their education.

I cannot tell what life would be like for the 42 families with special needs children if the Foundation were not here to support them. I focus on these because they are the families we serve daily. One thing I am sure about is that many of them would not have the opportunities they have now to go to monthly medical checkups, have their medication for their different illnesses, or the milk, education, vitamins, and many other things we help them with. We not only care about their material needs, but we also care about their spiritual and emotional life. We do family visits to check on them, encourage them when their children are not doing well, listen to their problems, and seek solutions with them. We become friends, sisters, parents, and spiritual guides; we are there to support them in any way we can.

Many of these little angels would not be with us now if LHBH did not support them as it is doing. Most of the families lack resources to provide them all they need in terms of medical care and nutrition. We have helped many children recover from severe malnutrition. We have seen examples of children, whose doctors have given little hope to their parents, recover to the point that they are now strong and healthy kids. Situations like these motivate each one of us who work in this Foundation. This gives us the strength to continue doing what we do every day and be there for each child and his or her family.

The impact we have is the life improvement of all those families we serve with special needs children. There are many families that struggle with their special needs children. They do not understand what their children have, nor do they know how to help them or if they will have the opportunity to enjoy a quality life. When we accept a child into our program, we send the parents to see a specialist who helps answer their questions and concerns and learn about the illness that affects the child. After this, we work to help them understand

and accept the medical condition of their daughter or son. There are many parents who are uncertain about the life of their child, and whether they could develop any ability or integrate to regular school, or even get to have a good life. There is no other place in our community that helps families with special needs children; many (the grown ones) are rejected from elementary school because schools do not have adequate personnel to teach them. Many of the children we help will never be able to attend school in a classroom because of their medical condition.

We work together to teach all our children how to be more independent, communicate, move from one place to another, and not be afraid of their environment. Once the children start learning basic things, the mothers also start having a different attitude; they collaborate and interact more, and become more active in the community. We help the mothers to start small projects like sewing, making jewelry, and doing crafts; things they can sell to help support their families. Little by little each family starts making changes in their life. The message we are sharing is that there is hope, the families are not alone, each child is important, and we have to work together to see things change in our community. It is not easy, but we are here and we have made the commitment to work for these children.

Part of my responsibility is to build good relationships and communication with different entities that can help the Foundation. I keep the Board of Directors in the US informed, and I invite possible sponsors to learn about the ministry and the work we are doing. For example, we started working with the Trujillo Rotary Club on the construction of the therapeutic playground two years ago. My responsibility during this time has been to communicate the progress of the project, share needs, and to arrange meetings between Trujillo Rotary Club and LHBH teams that come to work on the projects.

I have also worked with the municipality and the mayor to get help with activities and projects at LHBH. I have attended conferences and study workshops with other NGOs that are in the same area of work as LHBH. I have had the privilege to meet new people and professionals, many of whom are helping the Foundation in its education and rehabilitation program. Also, the communication

with the families is very important because our work and efforts are directed to support them. Therefore, I make sure to talk and visit with them, to share with the parents, and learn about their needs and how we can help them. This also helps us to know how the children are doing and to follow up their progress. I am also engaged in communicating with churches for activities, leading teams for projects, helping volunteers understand the work we do, and involve them in it. These are just some of the communication activities I am engaged in.

As an initiative of the teachers and board members and in collaboration with different local and outside help, we have started the construction of a therapeutic playground for our special needs children. This will be the first adapted playground for our children with different disabilities; they previously had no access to a play area. This project started two years ago with the evaluation and identification of the need for the project for the special needs children and with the selection of the location where the construction is taking place. The purpose is to teach our children to interact with their environment, have fun, and learn to be more independent through games and activities.



We have children who do not have access to a play area. Many have never been in one because their communities do not have playgrounds, or their families do not have the facilities to take them to one, or because their medical conditions do not allow them to get to one. Local parks are simply not adequate for special needs children.



Artist rendering of the treehouse in the playground

The adaptive playground will have different stations that are created to lead the children into a learning experience designed to change their perception of open space and the interaction with other children. We want each child to feel secure, to explore, ask, interact, and have fun all at the same time. The teachers will adapt their classes and activities to be able to use this space that will have a variety of educational stations for the children to use and learn.



Benefits

What are the benefits of community engagement led by someone who knows the community, who sees the needs firsthand, and who can search out the solutions? How do you measure the benefit accruing to one of the poorest countries in the northern hemisphere when young women are trained as leaders and change agents, committed to making a difference in their families, their communities, and their country, and then

go out to engage organizations and communities across Honduras, for the good of many? Is it even possible to measure the benefits to special needs children and their families who now have support, encouragement, and attention? What is the benefit of bringing encouragement, hope, and purpose to young women through a book club? How does one measure the impact of lives changed as a result of young women becoming leaders who want to help their communities, and who are "willing to step forward to create change in their world" (Wheatley, 2007, p.292). And what is the benefit to the young women who defy tradition, convention, and culture to pursue education and a vocation rather than following the cultural norm of bearing and raising children at a young age? The benefit of changed lives in many rural Honduran communities cannot be easily measured. But the incredible benefits can be easily seen, and more importantly experienced at the heart-level, when you read these stories of community engagement. Ripples of change are flowing out from the campus of The Leadership Center to touch individuals and communities across Honduras, to the glory of God!

"Every change, every burst of creativity, begins with the identification of a problem or opportunity that somebody finds meaningful. As soon as people become interested in an issue, their creativity is engaged. If we want people to be innovative, leaders must engage them in meaningful issues" (Wheatley, 2007, p.77).

REFLECTIVE CRITIQUE

What ignites the sparks needed to change a community or a country? Does pouring in billions of dollars of aid change life for the poor? Easterly's (2006) comprehensive analysis would indicate not. As he put it, "It is a fantasy to think that the West can change complex societies with very different histories and cultures into some image of itself" (p. 28). He goes on to assert that the best hope for change and development is when the members of under-resourced communities and countries take on the role of searcher, working to understand and solve their own problems. In doing so, the ideas and the technology available from the developed world can serve as resources in the toolkit of these local change agents.

This community engagement profile seeks to show that communities begin to change when a

community member takes on the roles of leader and change agent, sees a problem, and steps forward to create change in her community (Wheatley, 2007). Ethical leadership practiced by local leaders who are committed to local change can ignite the sparks in local communities across Honduras that will one-day have a country-wide impact. The approach to community engagement that is taught and modeled at The Leadership Center and practiced by students and graduates can lead to long-term positive change in communities across Honduras. This community engagement portfolio highlights the stories of five young women who are leading community engagement initiatives. There are many more stories of community engagement that could be told. As of May 2019, there are 65 graduates of The Leadership Center and 35 more students studying on campus, including a new cohort of 20 students that began studying on campus in April 2019. The long-term benefit of the community engagement that begins at The Leadership Center and sends ripples out to communities and organizations across Honduras cannot be quantified but is nonetheless significant. These young leaders are the sparks that can ultimately change a culture and a country.

What I learned from this process? (Charles Seeley)

I served as the lead author on this community engagement portfolio. I recruited my co-authors based on what I knew about their community engagement activities. I played a small part in teaching and mentoring each of my co-authors as leaders and change agents. But they are the ones who have changed lives through their engagement in their communities. I have not accomplished that, nor do I believe I could accomplish what they have accomplished.

I have learned humility through this process. Dickson (2011) defines humility as, “The noble choice to forgo your status, deploy your resources or use your influence for the good of others before yourself” (p. 24). This is what I set out to do, albeit imperfectly, when I began traveling to rural Honduras to work with the students of The Leadership Center. I arrived at The Leadership Center with a solid resume of academic and professional accomplishments. I was well-prepared to teach these students. Yet, I am the one who is learning much from my students. These young women have risen above their challenging backgrounds to learn, to grow, and to become

leaders. I stand in awe of what these young women have accomplished in spite of the cultural and socioeconomic barriers, family pressures, and personal challenges they have faced. I have been deeply touched by their stories of community engagement. Through my community engagement with the young women of rural Honduras, I have experienced a truth discovered by Palmer (2018), who observed: “When I help young people flourish, they return the favor” (p. 32).

God has given me the opportunity to do many things in my life and my career. I was raised in a lower middle-class family in rural Wisconsin, but I have earned two bachelor degrees, two master degrees, two professional certifications, and a doctorate. I have been a management consultant, a systems analyst, a business analyst, a manager of people, a project manager, a program manager, a college professor, and an organizational leader. I have traveled to and toured many countries. I have given invited presentations at conferences in various countries and am a published author. I have also served in various roles in local churches and Christian ministries, including serving as a member of the Board of Directors of Leadership Mission International and on other advisory councils.

But nothing compares with the incredible experience God has given me with the students and graduates of The Leadership Center. When I talk with these young women and hear their stories, their hopes, their dreams, and their aspirations, I feel like I have entered into a sacred space. I am honored that they are willing to share with me. I am excited to see and feel their passion for their dreams. Getting their perspectives and insights into the life journey that brought them to their current place in the plan of God is indeed a special experience and a rare privilege. I sense the pleasure of the King of kings and Lord of lords as many of these young women describe their journey and acknowledge the role that He plays in that journey.

I have learned what it means to step out of my comfortable world in Arizona to engage the world and expand the kingdom of God by serving young women in rural Honduras (Roberts, 2010). I have learned what it means to use the skills and the passions that God has given me in the service of others. I have experienced the reality of something Roberts (2010) has stated, “Dream as big as you can possibly dream: God will always outdream you” (p.

234). I could not have dreamed that I would have had the incredible experience of working with these young leaders and writing an article together with them when I made my first trip to The Leadership Center. Nor could I have dreamed how important these young women and the work centered at The Leadership Center would become to me. Roberts (2011) put it so beautifully: “The message of Jesus is that nations and people can be transformed” (p. 133). I have been transformed as I play a part in the transformation of these young Honduran women, and as I observe them transforming their communities through their engagement.

The Lasting Effects of Community Engagement

My engagement in the learning community at The Leadership Center in rural Honduras has changed my life in numerous ways. My eyes have been opened to the reality and the challenges of life in a rural, third-world country. I have been given a glimpse into this life through numerous conversations with students and graduates. I have had a brief first-hand exposure when I visited the home communities and family residences of several students. And I have had a little taste of this life during my periods of residence on the campus of The Leadership Center.

From the perspective of professional development, my experience and my research into community engagement and development has broadened my background and understanding of what it means to be a leader and change agent. I had a strong educational and professional background in the tools and techniques of leading organizational change. As an outcome of my engagement in rural Honduras, I have grown in my understanding of what it means and what it takes to be a leader and a change agent in rural, under-resourced communities. I hope that my teaching has become richer and deeper as a result and my students benefit from my experience.

Honduras, the second poorest country in Central America, has become a frequent topic of the international news media. As a result of my experience in community engagement in rural Honduras, I have become a voice for the people of rural Honduras. Theirs is a very difficult path on which to travel. Poverty, lack of opportunity, and crime is an ever-present reality that they must face. Those of us who live in the relative affluence of the United States and the western world should

be very careful about casting dispersions on those who are seeking a better life in the US. We should not accept the hatred that some spew forth against those who desire to escape a life dominated by poverty and crime. The people who walk from Honduras to the border of the US in pursuit of a better life are not criminals nor are they invaders. They are human beings created in the image of God. While I am certainly not advocating an open border, I am asking that the people of rural Honduras be treated with respect and their dignity as human beings be honored. May God extend His grace in the midst of the human tragedy that is the result of man’s fallen nature!

As we close this community engagement profile, my co-authors and I would like to leave our readers with a final challenge. There are communities out there that need your engagement. Your skills and passion can make a significant difference in the lives of others. As Palmer (2018) so eloquently put it: “Let’s remind each other that the planet cries for all of us to contribute our personal gifts-whatever they may be-to the common good” (p. 113).

Soli Deo Gloria!

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