



YMCA-YWCA OF WINNIPEG

INTERNATIONAL NEWS

SUMMER 2007

International Youth Exchange

SPECIAL POINTS OF INTEREST:

- Update on the International Youth Exchange Program
- Read Tara Law's fascinating report about her stay in Mexico

Every year, the YMCA-YWCA of Winnipeg and the YMCA of Regina have the opportunity to send youth from their associations to the YMCA of Tijuana, Mexico. This year, the YMCA-YWCA of Guelph joined the partnership. The YMCA-YWCA of Guelph sent two youth from their association to the YMCA of Tijuana in the early spring.

The YMCA of Tijuana works to provide a safe and secure environment for children. The Community Development Centre is located on the outskirts of Tijuana and delivers a variety of programs for all children. The CASA YMCA is a shelter for migrant youth who are detained at the Mexico/USA border or who are deported from the USA. The goal of this exchange is to foster a sense of youth global citizenship and to enhance the partnership between the associations. Youth from the YMCA-YWCA of Winnipeg and the YMCA of Regina are given the opportunity to gain a perspective of the economic and cultural realities of life in Mexico. Last year, Christy Riench from the YMCA-YWCA of Winnipeg and Devlin Williams from the

YMCA of Regina travelled to Tijuana, Mexico and returned to share their experiences and pass on the knowledge gained from the people in Tijuana and the important role the YMCA plays in that



community. A major goal of these exchanges is to revitalize and enhance staff, member and volunteer interest in the YMCA and YMCA-YWCA association's international programming. With the addition of another association to our international program, the ability to achieve this goal is well on its way.



Lisa Smith from Guelph said "In Guelph we have very little going on with international development. I would like to set up an international development committee to get things started in this area. Ideally, this committee would bring together people from a variety of different departments. The focus will be on finding opportunities for people to become involved in international exchanges, especially our leader corps youth; as well I would like to see more international programming throughout our organization".

"I think there are a number of formal and informal ways to share (my experiences) with a wider audience. Formally, I will speak to leader corps groups about my trip and the issues in Tijuana. Informally, I will be spending a ton of time talking about these issues with the people who I work with and my friends and family".



International Youth Exchange (contd)



Tijuana YMCA



Swimming lessons at the Tijuana YMCA

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YMCA, Tijuana, Mexico



Since their return, the staff from the YMCA-YWCA of Winnipeg have been working closely with their colleagues at the YMCA-YWCA of Guelph to establish an international committee.

One of the youth spoke about the major differences between the two cultures. "The most obvious cultural difference for me was that in Mexico people are much more relaxed when it comes to time. When people said they would be somewhere at a certain time, it really meant that they would be there around that time. Also, people down there do not cram their daily schedules like Canadians do. This was hard at first because I was bored and felt like I wasn't being particularly productive. But, after a couple weeks this feeling went away, and I found this attitude and the lifestyle in general to be a great deal more relaxing".

"Another cultural difference was the way that men treat women. In Mexico, men are very forward and do not hesitate to honk, shout at and approach women. On Revolution Street, while people are trying to sell you stuff you will often hear "Are you looking for a Mexican boyfriend?" Many car horns are wolf whistles and are used often. At first this is shocking and a little scary because at home this behaviour would be considered harassment. But, you realize soon that it is just another cultural difference and is not meant to be degrading".

"Another difference between Canada and Mexico are the rules regarding children. A prime example would be car seats; in Canada, a child must be in a car seat until the age of eight or they weigh 80 pounds. Mexicans are much more relaxed about this. Children are allowed to ride in cars unrestrained. In Canada, this behaviour

would be called neglect, but down in Mexico this is common practice. I found this shocking at first. Also, it surprised me to meet so many youth who had been sent on their own by their parents to illegally cross into the United States at such young ages. (We met a girl who was 14 from Mexico City who had flown to Tijuana to cross into the United States and travel to Los Angeles to hopefully find her father). It is just very different than when I was young and had to be home on the last bus".

The majority of time is spent working with youth. Lisa Smith from Guelph spent time with youth in the CASA and in the childcare. The majority of the expected recipients of the information and experiences gained from these international exchanges are our youth and children, in HFR programs, school childcare and pre-school childcare.

Tara's Tijuana Experience

Words cannot even begin to describe the experience that I have just had in Tijuana, Mexico. Before I did my exchange from the YMCA-YWCA of Winnipeg to the Tijuana YMCA, most of the information I received came from people that had stereotypical views of Tijuana. There were warnings and horror stories of the people, city, and crime that went on there. As someone who has worked in inner-city settings with many at-risk youth in Winnipeg I thought that I had seen and heard about situations that were shocking and upsetting and felt like I was ready for what Tijuana was going to show me.

However, after six weeks and four days here my eyes have only just opened and I have realized that Tijuana and the work that the YMCA is doing here is so much more than I ever expected. My eyes and heart are now open to Tijuana and the obstacles that the Tijuana Y are dealing with on a daily basis. This happened through my experience working at the YMCA Community Development Centre (CDC), the Casa YMCA for Migrant Youth (Casa), and seeing the larger migration issue that is plaguing Tijuana and Mexico as a whole.

The CDC in Tijuana is an amazing centre that delivers daily pre-school programs to over 200 children and their families, primarily from the community of Mariano Matamoros, but also surrounding communities. The students attend school from nine in the morning to noon and range from three to six years in age. Classes are large at 30 students and there are two 2nd level classes and four 3rd level classes. Each class has only one teacher. Classrooms are spacious, beautifully decorated, and well equipped with supplies for all students. There are also two outdoor play areas for recess and physical education classes. There is extended care for the students as well that begins at 7:30 a.m. and continues after school until 6:00 p.m. to accommodate parents, and especially single mothers who are in school or working full-time to support their families. The pre-school at the CDC is not free, but there is a subsidy program to help finance the families who cannot fully afford its services. The CDC also offers many other programs for its community members at low or no cost such as parenting classes, adult computer classes, adult education classes to get their grade twelve equivalent, tutoring for elementary school students with special needs, and first aid and health related (diabetes testing) courses for parents.

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Whilst working at the CDC, I was involved with the pre-school program as the English and computer teacher. This involved rotating to different classes throughout my day and teaching a predetermined curriculum. I taught English through colouring, drawing, songs, charades and other games. Students were engaged and excited about learning all about English, Canada and me. On our last day together we had a small Canada celebration where I shared Canadian flags and pins with the students. They were ecstatic and one student even compared their pin to being as valuable as a kiss.

Life at the Casa YMCA Safe House

Working at the Casa was the other component of the exchange that I feel extremely lucky to have experienced. The Casa YMCA is a safe house for adolescent youth ages thirteen to seventeen. Twice a day, the staff from the Casa drive to the border to pick up the youth from the DIF (Integral Family Development sector of the Mexican government) mobile unit and bring them to the Casa. The staff makes an attempt to contact family to retrieve the youth. In the interim, the Casa provides shelter, food, medical supplies and services, phone cards, toiletries, clothing, and a sympathetic ear for the youth. Their stay can range from a few minutes to a few weeks or



even months. There is no limit on the length of their stay; as long as the youth need the Casa it is their home.

Not only did I work at the Casa cleaning, cooking, and chatting with the youth that came through, but I lived there as well. I stayed in the female dorm room and all my meals were provided by the Casa and its staff. Living there really gave me the opportunity to get to know some of the youth that passed through its doors over the six weeks that I was there.

Despite their ordeals, the youth were polite, respectful, and helpful. They were curious about me and my background. We smiled and laughed together, but never cried. They were and are some of the most incredible people I have ever met and are an inspiration to me. The children that come to the Casa come from different places and arrive under different



circumstances. We had one young man arrive from Los Angeles. He was caught driving to the store and did not have his documentation with him so he was deported to Tijuana. He had lived in L.A. for thirteen years, spoke perfect English and had not been back to Mexico for twelve years. He had documentation and was a legal U.S. citizen, but the immigration officials did not give him the opportunity to access it, so he was deported and had to wait for his family to come from L.A. with his documents so he could go home. This was a very minor case as his family was able to reconnect with him and he was able to go home. We all were laughing about it with him as he left.

We also had a lot of youth who had been apprehended while trying to cross the desert or mountains. Some of these youth had been walking for days or even a week with little or no food or water. They were dirty, tired, hungry, scared, and dejected. Their money went to the people who were guiding them across, who are called Coyotes, so they had no money either. Some of the youth had been abused by the Coyotes or had witnessed abuse of others. One girl watched her cousin and uncle drown while the Coyotes watched and laughed. Another girl had been raped by another member of the migrating group she was in. Over half of the girls that are processed are pregnant or mothers. These are the stories and the youth we were dealing with and the Casa continues to deal with every day.

However, the majority of the youth we saw were coming from "The Line" or Tijuana/San Ysidro border crossing. Some try and walk through, others might try and get smuggled across, so desperate is their plight. One boy rode on top of the engine of an old truck under the hood.

Regardless of the method of crossing, the reason is always the same: the "American Dream". Youth are in pursuit of jobs, education, family reunification and money to send back home to Mexico. This has created towns made up entirely of women and children, as their husbands, brothers and fathers have gone North to find work and support their families. Working at the Casa has made me realize that not only do the policies need to change on the American side of the migration issue, but also, Mexico must address the issues that force its people to migrate in the first place.

All in all, going to Tijuana and working with the YMCA here has been an invaluable experience for me. As a future teacher I feel like I have new tools to take to the classroom and new experiences and information to share. As a friend I have new stories and memories to share. As a person, I have new eyes and knowledge about a problem I was very unaware of. It is thanks to all my experiences at the CDC, Casa, and in Tijuana in general that have created and molded these new tools that I have taken with me. I will never forget the friends, I made, the children I met and the experiences I had with the Tijuana YMCA and hope that others will be as fortunate as I have been, if this exchange continues in the future.



YMCA-YWCA

We build strong kids,
strong families, strong communities.

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Dates to remember

October 14 - 21, 2007
YWCA Week without Violence

October 24, 2007
UN United Nations Day

November 17 - 24, 2007
YMCA World Peace Week

For further information about volunteering at the
YMCA-YWCA of Winnipeg, please contact your
local branch or email info@ymcaywca.mb.ca

If you would like to make a donation to the YMCA-
YWCA of Winnipeg International Fund, please
call Valerie Slater, General Manager, Fundraising
and Communications, at 204 831 2975 or email
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