Reflection on “The Promise of a Pencil” by Adam Braun

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The story of the Pencils of Promise organization is one that resonates with me deeply. In the summer of 2013 I had the opportunity to travel to Nicaragua with one of the nonprofits mentioned in “The Promise of a Pencil” — Seeds of Learning (SOL). Like Adam Braun, I witnessed the severe poverty that people here in the United States rarely encounter and, like so many others, my heart went out to the children of the area.

I remember upon arriving in Villa Japon, Nicaragua, being astounded that the pictures of the extremely poor you’ve seen in documentaries of developing nations are all real. There are countless images of dirty young children hiding behind their mothers or behind doorways of little dirt floor huts and upon arrival at our construction site that is exactly what we saw. One of the images will stay with me the rest of my life. One of the doorways we passed our first day there partially concealed a beautiful young girl who I later had the chance to meet while taking a break from work. Just as Braun encountered and was inspired by Nuth, I encountered Anexia. From what little Spanish I knew, I learned that she was one of seven siblings, she was eight years old, and she loved school. Even though her classroom was a rickety lean-to built of rusty sheet metal, she was proud of it. Of all my interactions with children during the trip, I connected with her the most. I felt proud to be part of a group working so hard to better her education along with the education of many other children.
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The child that Braun encountered wished for a pencil. What I found in Nicaragua was that the children longed for markers. I do not know if it was the colors or the permanence or something else entirely, but the children absolutely loved the markers we handed out during crafts. Many of the markers walked off, but over the next few days we would occasionally see children writing their names on an old candy wrapper or a flat rock with the missing markers. That is an image that humbles me to this day as I still ask myself what I did to be born into a life where a marker is a trivial object, when these children were born into a society where a marker is the equivalent of a piece of gold. I have to believe that my thoughts that day were similar to Braun’s as he discovered just what a pencil meant to the young boy in the East.

When I returned to the states, my cross-country practices began and, as required by our athletic department, my team began looking for a community service project. Naturally, I suggested collecting donated school supplies for the school in Nicaragua I had helped to construct. I wanted the school to have many pencils, pens, markers, and an abundance of paper and notebooks for the children to have the tools necessary to not only learn but to make learning fun and encourage them to stay in school. Originally the athletic department did not want to allow the project because we were supposed to serve the local community, but after explaining my connection with the Nicaraguan school the athletic director decided to allow it. My team’s collection of school supplies became the first international service project completed by a sports team from our school, something I am very proud of.

My Nicaraguan trip opened my eyes to the rest of the world and I cannot help but believe that I got more out of the service trip than the children whose lives we were changing for the better. If you give children an education, they can do so much more with their lives than if you were to give them free handouts, such as food. With an education they can learn to be self-
sufficient and maybe even go on to help better the lives of others and thereby advance their own communities. My humbling experiences in a developing nation gave me a lot of respect for Braun. He went far beyond anything I would have even considered. The fact that he not only dreamed of building hundreds of schools but made it happen is something that is inspiring to no end. It’s inspiring enough to believe that there may one day be public education for all children in the Middle East and education may replace the violence there. It sounds impossible but, according to Braun, so was building hundreds of schools starting with twenty-five dollars.