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For the past year, I have participated in the Ignatian Colleagues Program, which brings educators and leaders from Jesuit colleges and universities together for formation in the Jesuit and Catholic tradition of higher education. An important part of the program is a week-long immersion experience in one of five developing world countries with active Jesuit ministries. Last week, I joined nine other Ignatian Colleagues for an unforgettable week in Belize.

My first impression was that Belize is lush and full of life. We spent the first half of the trip traveling with colleagues from St. John's University in Belize to learn about ancient and modern Mayan culture and the impacts of colonialism, including the widespread adoption of English as the official language of Belize. I was surprised to learn that most Belizean children grow up speaking Kriol, but when they enter school they are immediately required to adopt English. We visited several schools and spoke with students and educators.

In Corazon Creek, we met the principal of a secondary school with no electricity where students travel from 40 surrounding villages to obtain a high school education. We had lunch at Gales Point Manatee, a Maroon community established by Mr. Gale, who escaped slavery in the early 1800's and built a village which continues largely without any assistance from the government and the looming threat of forced relocation. We also visited Valley of the Peace, which began as a large-scale project coordinated by the Belizean government to resettle refugees escaping the Salvadoran Civil War in the late 1970's and early 80's. **High school students in these communities are like high school students everywhere: bright, inquisitive, shy at times, and motivated to succeed despite significant challenges accessing education.**

In the second half of the trip we visited students in prison. The first prison was a youth "hostel" for children who have committed minor crimes. The set up was similar to a school, until we entered the "dorms" which featured metal doors, painted bright colors to disguise the purpose of the cells used to cage children "for their own protection." Children here were mostly quiet and often looked out the window, a stark contrast from the giggling, smiling students we met earlier in the week who were happy to tell us their goals and dreams for their future.

Our next stop was Belize Central Prison and Wagner Youth Facility, where adults and young people, respectively, are held for pre- and post- sentencing. **Students here wear orange jumpsuits, students walk in lines, and mostly avoid eye contact.** We learned that students are expected to complete their primary and secondary education online, teaching themselves through modules with very limited access to content. **Despite these challenges, one of the students graduated from the program with the highest scores in the entire country.** We sat with students in small groups and learned more about them and their experiences at Wagners.

Having taught in a juvenile detention facility in the past, I knew better than to ask these students about their families or goals for the future— topics that can be painful for children experiencing the trauma of incarceration. Instead, we talked about music. They told me riddles and laughed when I couldn't solve them. They asked me about my education and I asked them what brings them joy despite their circumstances. The majority said education. **One student said, "Because I'm here I'm not dead. If I wasn't here, I might be."** Before we left, they made sure that I memorized their names, **Leroy, Devaun, Trey, Omarion, and Blane.** They thanked me for visiting. I was grateful for the opportunity to share space with them, most people don't get that privilege.

Many of my Ignatian colleagues had never visited a prison before. **All of us came out of this experience transformed.**

We asked the teachers in the various schools what resources they wished they had for their students. Answers varied from internet/ technology to cultural change such as providing more opportunities for girls to continue their education. At Wagner's, the teacher expressed the hope that more people would visit the prison and meet his students, who are often forgotten. **He shared that his students "need people to care about them. They need to be loved."**

Caring about people in prison and visiting them is central to our faith as Christians. I will take the stories of the boys and men in Belize Central Prison to my students at Rayburn Correctional Center in Louisiana. Hopefully, through partnerships, we will continue to work to make the world better for us all.

I am grateful that I had the opportunity to spend even brief moments with so many amazing communities in Belize. I am grateful that the Society of Jesus works to uplift the lives of those I met and many others across the world seeking education and resources.

For more information about the prison ministry in Belize, watch Ian Peoples, SJ and Dan Finucane, SJ's episode of [Magis Talk](#), which interviews two incarcerated men about their experiences at Belize Central Prison.

Best Wishes,

Dr. Annie Phoenix

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