

# NINE WORDS ON MY YAGM YEAR

## LAUGHTER // RISAS

There was always laughter sitting at the dinner table every Sunday afternoon with my family gathered around, grabbing at steaming corn tortillas and asking to pass the salsa. There always are jokes, especially about my water bottle and interactions with dogs but they were always made in love. In other communities, such as ProDESC where the nature of work is serious and soccer where we occasionally got pretty competitive, we could always count on some boisterous or sassy comments to get us all laughing.



Dressed up as miners in a small mining town with some of my host family-- Victor Hugo, Karla, Georgina, and Juan. It was my *despedida* day and a day filled with gratitude, cool sights, and LOTS of laughter.

## HUMBLE // HUMILDAD

In a new language, new city, new sport and new job there is ALWAYS something to learn and some way to fail. Just got to laugh, learn and keep on living. It keeps you humble.

Furthermore, there are very few things I did completely on my own. A reliance on others to know where to go, how to get there/back, how to make it, what to buy, what it's called, etc. was continually humbling for a person used to being "independent". However, this humbling reliance is a great way to build and maintain community, something I think our prideful independent culture lacks.

However, it gets me that my 9 year old host nephew is still required to go with me across the street to buy tortillas...

## LEARNING // APRENDIZAJE

There was an immense amount of patience and frustration along the way but I've come far here in Mexico. Though I took Spanish in school and college but there is nothing like living in it 24/7. I was able to get a true immersion experience and I loved it. More than language, I was dunked into information on human rights, human rights defenders and the general injustices existing here in Mexico. I became more interested in politics and economic influences as these have ripple effects around the world. I learned what machismo feels like, how to quickly identify it and why feminism is so incredibly urgent not

only in Latin America but everywhere in the world. I learned what pollution looks and feels like, too. I learned more on my personality, my gifts and flaws. I learned how to hang my clothes on the line without clothespins. I could go on...

*There wasn't a day I didn't learn, and that is a beautiful and important way to live.*



Last practice, soaked from the rain and with full smiles.



Most of the ProDESC team, people I learned from every single day. This photo was after a presentation by a fellow human rights lawyer from India (center) on the situation in India in the face of upcoming changes to their constitution.

## FEAR//MIEDO

What is a year of life without some challenges? One continuous challenge I had this year was feeling fear. There are of course the classic fears: of not being understood, of gaining weight, and of being forgotten. And there were some more specific fears: of talking in front of a group in Spanish, of walking alone and of taking public transit, especially after I learned firsthand that I had many reasons to be fearful.

More than fear there were a lot of people who took my hand, led me on, listened patiently, went running with me, etc. I believe fear is important, but I believe people alongside you to combat fear or avoid situations that give you fear is even more important. I owe so much to the co-workers, friends and family members who let me cry, gave me advice, and never let me be alone in my fear.

## CELEBRATIONS//FIESTAS

Here, there is always a reason to celebrate. It could mean 6+ hours of a party after baptizing a baby or just putting on Dancing Queen when something at work turns out well. Mexicans celebrate well. This year has been filled with singing "Las Mañanitas" (traditional birthday song) and cakes on cakes on... jello. But cakes here are much tastier and I've even begun to enjoy jello... a bit. *Por ejemplo*, my birthday was celebrated three times with three cakes.

During the first traditional bite, my face was only pushed into the cake once.



With Christian and his family.



At ProDESC.



At home with my host family, Hugito peeking in from the side.

## LISTENING // OÍDOS ABIERTOS

To say I was quiet this year would be accurate. It sometimes felt odd to me to speak when I kept listening to amazing stories and perspectives. Stories of heartache, of tough times, of joyous moments, of how people got where they are today. Sometimes it was hard to listen to someone tell about devastating family issues and childhoods or about daily experiences with human rights violations. Sometimes I couldn't stop laughing as someone told a metro story. No matter the story, I felt honored to be the trusted listener. And by listening, I grew in my understanding of the world and how I want to be in the world.

## FULL // LLENO

I was filled with care and love by many. The relationships that grew here are lifelong and I am thankful Mexico is not so far away. Mexico is also rich with sights, sounds, smells, etc. Here are some of the senses that filled my year.

**Sounds** of car horns, men yelling GAAAAAAS or BASUUURAAA in the morning, the yells of people selling products in the metro, shouts for and from the boys in my house, scissors quickly and precisely cutting chicken, metal curtains closing, *Banda* music blasting and the street sweepers sweeping.

**Touches** of cheeks on cheeks as a greeting, my hands grasping the slick metro bars, my finger on the doorbell to enter ProDESC, back pats post soccer games, the thick scar from my dog bite, the arm of my host sister as we walk, my body bumping along in a *bicitaxi* to my house, and the little hugs of Luisito.

**Smells** of my host family's home, raw chicken, *fabuloso* cleaner, smog, street tacos, my host mom's perfume, and fresh squeezed oranges.

**Tastes** of papaya, chocolate covered raisins, sweet breads, cheese samples at the Oaxaca food truck, *horchata*, steaming corn tortillas, chicken liver (don't recommend), tacos al pastor, spicy salsas, and lime.

**Sights** of my neighborhood zooming by from the metro, my neighbor's rooftop with their isty bitsy Chihuahua and the two iguanas, people kissing, people begging, men staring, and the sunrise from my rooftop in the mornings.



Luisito and I using watercolors together, a favorite activity with me of his and of Hugito toward the end.



A hike with fellow YAGMs (Gracia, me, Mel and Catherine) near Tepoztlán, Morelos.

## BEAUTIFUL//HERMOSA

Mexico is beautiful and diverse and... not just beaches and deserts. I'll tell you what though, those are beautiful too. I was enchanted by the small towns, cities, green forests and every so iconic volcanoes and mountains. The people, too, are incredibly beautiful. Being shoved up against dozens of people in the metro gives you good time to really look at someone and find their beauty. I've come to appreciate the few people who don't dye their hair black and let their grey hairs (*canas*) show.



Beautiful, inspiring and strong women who make up the National Coordinator of Women Defenders of Labor Human Rights. They are leaders of initiatives and fights for the human rights of fellow domestic workers, workers in *maquilas* (factories, larger on the MX- US border), migrant workers and agricultural workers. They may be marginalized women but that will not hold them back. Being in their presence was one of the more powerful experiences during my time at ProDESC.

## LIFE//VIDA

This year was not a trip and it was much more than traveling. It was a year of my life lived, where I got settled, found routine and integrated into communities. It was a year of growth in many ways, of love, pain, loss, gain, beauty and brokenness. It was a year of gratitude for those at home and those here with me in MX. It has been a

blessing to have been welcomed so fully into this country and been given so many well wishes as I go where I am reminded that "you have a home here when you return." It may not be easy leave but it's just a sign of how wonderful my experience was. To you all who supported me through this year and to you all who walked with me through it, thank you. Thank you for blessing me with a rich, rich year of my life.

As I return to my life back in the US, I want to share a post from YAGMs in Rwanda that may help me give you a more meaningful response to curiosity about my time.

Here are a few questions to get your conversation started:

- Who will you miss the most?
- What is a sound/smell/taste that will always remind you of Mexico?
- What surprised you about Mexico?
- Can you tell me about one of your best friends?
- How did you see God at work in your community?
- How did your community show you love?
- What was one of your hardest days?

In general, stick to asking specific questions. It's hard to encapsulate an entire year in response to a question like, "How was it?" Instead, ask us out for lunch/coffee/a drink! We're excited to share!

If you'd like to read more, take a look at my blog at [ryanaholt.wordpress.com](http://ryanaholt.wordpress.com) for a tribute to a dear friend who was killed in Mexico City and some about the current protests on the educational reform that are heating up.

*Abrazos a todos y todas,*

Ryana



My host nephew's soccer final with my host mom and sister // At a free Marc Anthony concert with Gracia and Christian and thousands and thousands more people // My YAGM group with our newest members, Isabella and Aiden.