

¡Buenos días! ¡Saludos desde la linda capital de Panamá!

We departed Newark yesterday on time and without complications—the three hour wait for which we had prepared did not materialize, most of us got through security in about 5 minutes—and had a pretty calm flight, with just a bit of turbulence over the Gulf of Mexico.



Our arrival in Panamá was smooth as well... and the students learned I was \*not\* joking about how warm and humid Panamá was... everyone was stunned by the air that hit us on departing the airport. We were met by Elvira, our guide, and Jimmy, our driver, and got to the hotel in downtown Panamá City. Once checked in, we went out for a late dinner at one of my favorite restaurants, Cafetería Manolo. This restaurant is Spanish—owned by a Spaniard and featuring the foods of Spain. This may sound like an odd choice for a first meal in Panamá, but it is two blocks from our hotel, quite pleasant, affordable, open 24 hours... and a sentimental favorite of mine. My Panamanian husband took me here the first night of our honeymoon and we have made it a tradition to have our first meal here every time we come to Panamá.





Some of the students went all out and explored the options: Greg went for *pulpo al ajillo* (octopus in garlic sauce, my personal favorite and something you just can't find in the US!), Grace enjoyed ceviche (Panamá's pride, fish and/or seafood "cooked" with lime juice), and many had *patacones* (also known as *tostones*, fried green plantains) as their side dish.



Today we head out for a tour of the city and the Panamá Canal; we'll have lunch at some point, most likely in the Casco Antiguo, the utterly charming historic district.

¡Que pasen un bien día! Have a lovely day!

Cordially,

Erika M. Sutherland



¡Buenos días! ¡Saludos desde Chiriquí!

I had hoped to get a note out yesterday before we left Panamá City, but ran out of time before we started our day. ¡Lo siento mucho!

The night of our first full day in Panamá we all returned to the hotel tired: although we did not get going \*all\* that early—our driver picked us up at 8:45—between the heat, humidity, more than a bit of walking, some amazing food, and a bit of cultural readjustment, it was an early evening. The realities of international travel or a well-planned strategy to avoid late-night adventuring by the students... you decide! Yesterday we began the day with a visit to the Panamá Canal, where we saw 2 giant ships pass through the locks, headed north from the Pacific to the Atlantic. Students also saw a short video and went through the canal museum; you can learn more about the canal—and even check out boats going through on the live-action online cameras at <https://www.pancanal.com/eng/>

From the Miraflores Locks we moved on to a tour of the former Canal Zone. Since this area was returned to Panamá in 1997, some of the original American installations have remained functioning as the main administration of the Canal while others have been transformed into headquarters for non-governmental (NGO) agencies, schools, galleries, and clinics serving the general public. We went into the central administration building, modeled on the US capitol in Washington DC, constructed of all US-based materials: the pink marble stairs from Tennessee are, in particular, a detail that echoes many buildings in the US; the original buildings at Muhlenberg College, for example, are full of this very same marble. One special feature of this building is the painting of the canal construction that fills the rotunda's dome.



We headed from the former Canal Zone to the Casco Antiguo, the historic district. This area is where the second capital city was built- this first city, built in the early 16th century, was destroyed by none other than Captain Henry Morgan, the British privateer/pirate whose crew did significant damage on both coasts of Panama. Why? The Isthmus of Panama is the shortest and least mountainous point to cross from the Pacific (the Mar del Sur, or Southern Sea, as Balboa called it) to the Atlantic; as Spain extracted and developed formal systems to mine, refine, and export the gold, silver, and other resources of South America, virtually all shipments would pass from Panamá City across to Portobelo, where it would be inventoried and held for the flotillas of ships that would carry it to Spain. Both Panamá City and Portobelo were then very attractive targets for pirates.

The Casco Antiguo has buildings dating to the 17<sup>th</sup> century, but the vast majority date from the late 18<sup>th</sup> and early 19<sup>th</sup> century. Over the years some of them have fallen into disrepair, but in the past 2 decades an active movement to restore the area has made the Casco Antiguo a prime zone for renovation. It is a UNESCO world heritage site, so there are strict rules regarding renovations: all facades must be preserved, but virtually anything can be done to reconstruct building behind their facades. What the visitor sees, then, are stunning facades, with a blend of empty shells behind them awaiting restoration, elegant inns, restaurants, galleries, coffee shops, and private houses in some of them, and a few houses

still unrestored, even crumbling, but full of families who have lived there for generations and who will remain until new investors push them out as part of urban renewal.



In the Casco Antiguo we explored the Iglesia de San José, with its enormous gold altar (it's one of the few gold altars in the Americas, as most gold and silver was sent on to Spain), and the many stalls and kiosks selling traditional Guna (or Kuna) crafts. Tiny carved tagua nuts and intricately reverse-appliquéd molas may be making their way back as gifts... they are truly special objects, handcrafted with precision and often sold by the very artisans who made them.

We also found a shop with a lot of Guatemalan textiles and beadwork—it was very hard to stop once craft shopping began. I should say that in our class we discussed the importance of supporting artisans and also the art and ethics of bargaining: we know that bargaining is an expected part of many transactions here, but we discussed the relative value of the dollar that might be saved through bargaining (an item on the McDonald's value menu, perhaps) vs. what that dollar can purchase for a struggling family (4-5 pounds of rice). Professor Cronin and I were very pleased to see that students were making purchases and successfully—but not abusively—bargaining for them in Spanish. Davey and Shoshana get a special shout out for this!

That evening we walked to El Trapiche, a restaurant specializing in foods from the interior of Panamá, with dishes combining meat and corn in a zillion ways. My two favorite eating companions in Panama, my cousins Julie and Mauricio, joined us for dinner. Mauricio heard that Davey and Greg were having issues with snoring... and stopped to get ear plugs for them on the way back to the hotel. It's great to have family here: they help out in many ways big and small.



Today we started out with a talk \*in Spanish\* on the Panamanian health system, led by the USF partner now affiliated with the Ministry of Health, Dr. Arturo Rebollón. The students introduced

themselves in Spanish (we have been practicing formal introductions in Spanish throughout the semester) and went on to ask some really on-point and well-informed questions. Dr. Rebollón expressed his surprise at their level of thinking and preparation... he was surprised that they are undergrads, not grad students: props go to Professor Cronin for her excellent preparation!

After the talk we went to the airport for our flight to David, in the western province of Chiriquí. Before we could leave the city, though, we were met with the first truly torrential tropical storm.



YES! This IS rain \*coating\* the windows of the airport shuttle!

We had to sit in the shuttle while the airport determined that flights simply had to be delayed. We returned to the gate, had some café Durán (one of the two major coffee growers' brands here), and within 20 minutes were boarding again. ¡Todo bien!



The flight was delayed but once we departed, it was a quick and uneventful flight. In David, we were met by our driver, had a late lunch, hit a grocery store for water, shampoo, bug spray, and more snacks that I could imagine, and finally, after dark now, arrived at our hotel in Las Lajas.



With study abroad, glitches are more the norm than the exception, and we hit our first glitch with the hotel in Las Lajas. Professor Cronin and I had stayed here last summer as part of our research trip to prepare this class and found it the right blend of nice, affordable, and on the beach.... a good situation for students who we know will be tired from their daily fieldwork here! We are not exactly sure what happened, but a combination of miscommunication with the USF and some construction issues here at the hotel left them able to offer us fewer rooms than we had reserved. Today we will be straightening this out, but for our first night, students were asked to sleep 3 or 4 to a room; each of our rooms has 3 beds, so in the end, to allow everyone a bed of her own (the two men, for obvious reasons, were out of this...), Team Rachel (aka Rachel<sup>2</sup>) ended up sharing a room with me. It's a gorgeous sunny morning now, and I hear no complaints, so I think we made it!



Before we take off for our first day in the comarca, I'd like to share some of the amazing critters that abound in the tropics. Last night, we found land crabs (they come out towards dark, especially in moist areas or evenings) and a very large (6 or 7" across!) moth at the hotel... students also found frogs, both large and small, lots of other bugs, large and small, and the charming house cats that keep watch over the hotel's patio.



Wish us luck! We are in the land of insects, bumpy roads, and adventure. Your students will be seeing and experiencing unfamiliar sounds, tastes, and comfort levels... but will come back each night for a dip in the pool, a lovely dinner, and time to gaze out over the Pacific.

¡Que pasen todos un buen día!

Erika M. Sutherland

¡Buenos días!

Yesterday we began our work in the *comarca* Ngäbe-Buglé. First we met up with Rosmery Pascacio, an extraordinary woman who has worked with the University of South Florida and other organizations to facilitate community outreach programs; she is Ngäbe and speaks Ngöbere and Spansih fluently; she has a law degree and is passionate about building bridges that help her community connect better with outside partners and resources. We went to meet with regional government officials, who welcomed the group and explained a bit about how the local government connects with the national one.



Two of the teams met with their community partners: Team Domestic Violence will be working with MIDES, the Ministry (equivalent to a US Department) of Social and Economic Development. Rosmery is the woman in the middle of the picture, in the red and yellow traditional – and ubiquitous here-- *nagua*.

Team Water will be working with the Ministry of the Environment. MiAmbiente is working on a reforestation program; Team Water will start out today helping with that, giving Karisa, Ellie, and Grace the opportunity to build trust with their partners: there will be lots of time for informal conversation as they fill bags with soil for seedlings without the heavy obligation for *sustained* conversations... an ideal way to ease into Spanish speaking. By next week it will be clear who will be their best interviewees and informants, we are sure. First stop on our agenda today: purchasing gardening gloves for all. You can see in both photos that our students are doing a good job of dressing for mosquitoes and mud!







We left the comarca and crossed back into Chiriquí for our tour of the hospital of Sna Félix. There we met with the two doctors on staff that day and got to the both the up to date equipment and the clear lack of other staff and supplies there. The hospital serves much of the comarca Ngäbe-Buglé as well as the *latina* communities in Chiriquí. They work miracles with the very most basic of infrastructure and resources; telemedicine helps make the most out of scarce resources, but it is clear how difficult things are. And yet they still have time to welcome students... the radiology technician even presented Sarah with a home-grown avocado!



As we begin our second day of work in the *comarca* Ngäbe-Buglé I wanted to share a bit about why we are here. Professors Cronin and Burger, both Public Health professors, work with both the science of public health and the underlying –and often social, economic, and political– causes of disparities in health and access to healthcare. As a professor of Spanish language and cultures, I am helping students develop the communicative and cultural competencies to both function and more fully understand the conversations they are having, the things they are seeing, and the information they are collecting. These competencies –a combination of technical skills, specialized vocabulary, historical background, cultural context, and an awareness that ways thinking and expressing are culturally determined and thus must be negotiated—can be taught in a classroom, but they come to life when put into action.

For the students this can be both exhilarating and intimidating. For the Ngäbe-Buglé, who live in the *comarca* and speak Ngöbere, these issues play heavily into their intersections with the Spanish-speaking health care system and the Spanish-speaking *latina* community, government, and businesses beyond the *comarca*.



The Ngäbe-Buglé make up Panamá's largest indigenous group; in 1997 the comarca was legally established; you can see that there are several other indigenous comarcas in Panamá.



The second map shows the country before these comarcas were recognized as legal political entities; note that the region called San Blas is exactly the same as the comarca Guna Yala; the Guna (also called Kuna) were the first group to demand recognition and self-determinacy, setting a model for other indigenous groups.



I see that time is running away—stay tuned for tomorrow's missive!

Que pasen un lindo día,

Cordialmente,

Erika M. Sutherland

¡Buenos días!

Today's note will be a quick one—we are headed out to begin our service project with the hospital at San Felix.... first step will be collecting river stones to create a decorative drainage base for the plantings; the stones will be laid out in a way that echoes the traditional nagua designs of the Ngäbe-Buglé. The Ngäbe-Buglé make up about 80% of the patients at this regional hospital. Our own Sarah Weyhmuller has designed a simple design that incorporates low plants, 4 medium size decorative bushes, and a taller specimen shrub or tree for the center, all set off by different sizes of river rocks. These are the smooth stones you can buy in bags at Home Depot for \$10... here pretty much \*every\* stone is a river rock... Our community partners have been very excited about this project and will be helping with some of the hauling, digging, and obtaining the plants themselves.



Yesterday Team Water and Team Domestic Violence began work with their community partners. With Professor Cronin, the students exploring the incidence, perception of, and resources available for victims of domestic violence spent the morning conversing in Spanish with staff, clients, and visitors of MIDES, the Ministry of Social Development, the government agency charged with helping families with a variety of challenges. They were able to hear a variety of things about domestic violence. Working with Dr. Burger, Team Water spent their morning collaborating with a watershed protection project of the Ministry of the Environment. The Ministry plans to plant some 70,000 trees this season, and we were asked to help out... and so Grace, Karisa, Ellie, and Dr. Burger did, filling bags with soil to hold seedlings.





This was an excellent and low-stress way for students to talk with community partners and others about water. We have reports of facebook friends now! One of the volunteers invited us to join for a fund raising party this Monday, with music, food, dancing, all to raise money for the hospital.



I took the rest of the student deeper up into the comarca. We met our partner Rosmery and were introduced to a second Ngäbe woman, Olga, a specialist in medicinal plants, and an educator, Marino, for a hike up into one of the not-too-too-distant communities where ASATRAN is located.





The first sign we were in deep was that the road ended... and we had (or got!) to cross the river on a *zarzo*. Sarah Evenosky shows you what that is:



We then hiked some 20 minutes (45 for this older and chubbier professor, sorry to say!) up, passing Ngäbe children as they were hiking down to school. Some children walk as many as 3 hours each way to school every day; school runs from 12-5 pm to accommodate the walk, but it seems hard to believe that kids would be able to hike in the dark on their way home... We also saw children who were not in their uniforms, meaning they were not in school. We heard that some kids simply do not go to school so they can help their families or in some cases schools close if teachers cannot make it for whatever reason. No substitute teachers here.

We met a traditional midwife and others who work with medicinal plants. They answered questions about maternal health and how the two medical practices intersect. The short answer: not always smoothly.

Team Traditional Medicine will return here on Monday and Tuesday for further conversation and to help out with the research, growing, collecting, drying, and packaging facilities. Davey and Hannah show off the fertilizer/compost shed there:





ASASTRAN is the Ngäbe association that promotes and supports the cultivation and use of medicinal plant; it was founded in 1997 by a Basque doctor who came to Panamá and fell in love with the beauty and natural and human richness of the Ngäbe communities and who realized how desperately abandoned these communities were then. This situation is better now than it was then – the comarca, for example, now exists as a self-determined legal area—but there is a lot left to do. ASASTRAN works with the traditional practices and beliefs but helps growers and healers connect with the modern health system: traditional healers are a formal part of health care system in the indigenous areas.

As we came back down from the village, we crossed the zarzo again and stopped by the hospital. The final 2 teams, asthma and maternal health, will be working there starting Monday.



The day ended with a discussion of the day's events... and a surprise birthday brownie for Ellie.





Have a good day—we will be splashing in the river this morning, collecting stones... we may be planting this afternoon as well. Tomorrow: a day of fun!

Cordially,

Erika M. Sutherland

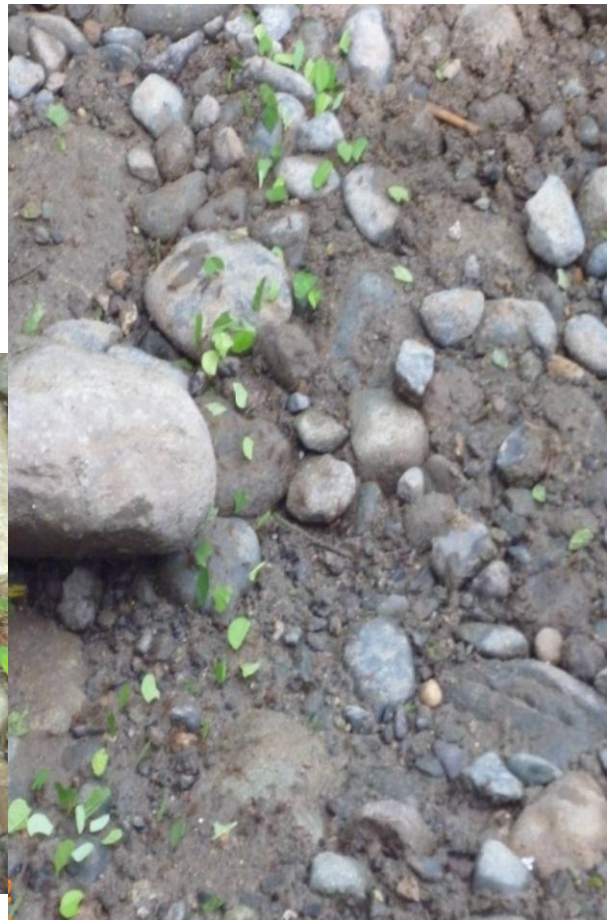




Whew! We have just completed two extraordinary and very different days—our service project day and our day of fun.

Our service project was to restore the main patio garden of the hospital at San Felix, both to make it more attractive and meaningful for the patients and families who wait there and to reduce areas of poor drainage where mosquitoes can breed. Working with a design by Sarah Weyhmuller and the resources of our community partners, the first step was to assemble the raw materials: the river rocks that would be the decorative base for drainage.

As we headed down the path from the road to the river, we spotted a line of leaf-cutter ants: you can see their perfect formation, with the ants carrying leaves all walking in one direction, the ants headed out to pick up leaves marching in the opposite direction. These ants can carry many times their weight. We did not know when we saw them how perfect a metaphor they would be for the day to come!



On the side of the river were many hundreds of thousands of smooth stones... by the end of the day, a few fewer... Working with our Ngäbe community partners, we collected rocks and loaded them into a pickup.

This apparently simple task was really hard: it was hot, the sun was strong, and the stones—perhaps we should not have been quite so surprised by this—were really heavy.







The río San Félix is a lovely river that winds its way down from pretty high mountain peaks; the Ngäbe use it for washing, laundry, drinking water, water for animals, and just plain refreshment. It is not clean water, certainly not potable by either US or Panamanian standards, but for the people living here who are unable to afford bottled water, this is it. We should note that Panamá is famous for its water quality—we can drink tap water without fear in virtually all of Panamá... except Bocas del Toro (on the northwest Caribbean coast, where the banana

and cacao plantations are) and the comarca Ngäbe-Buglé. When we go into the comarca for our field work we go armed with cases of bottled water—we have gone through 7 cases so far and purchased 3 more today.

The rocks we collected were left at the hospital while a small group, this time with Dr. Burger and Olga Montero, the Ngäbe specialist in medical plants who is working with us, crossed the zarzo and climbed deeper into the comarca to collect plants for the garden. They brought back 4 *banderas* (see picture) and about 80 low-growing *sábilas* (=aloes); 2 government agencies will be bringing more plants today (Monday) or tomorrow to complete our garden.







I told the students that they would sweat in Panamá as they have never sweat before... this was the day for that piece of advice to come to life! It was hard work—and we have yet to finish—but this sort of project helps the comarca and helps us gain entry into what would otherwise be a community wary of outsiders.

Yesterday, Sunday, was our day of fun. We broke into 3 groups for 3 different excursions, all organized by Boquete Outdoor Adventures. <http://www.boqueteoutdooradventures.com/>

One group spent the day in the Bahía de Chiriquí, boating, snorkeling, and exploring two of the many islands here. One special treat: *agua de pipa*, coconuts right from the palm, with water and the spongy coconut on the inside.... messy but good was what the critics report.





The other students traveled north, into the highlands of Chiriquí, to Boquete. This town is home to thousands of American ex-pats, mostly retirees.... when you feel the notably drier and cooler air and see familiar Pennsylvania-type flowers and foliage mixed with the palms, you understand why this is so attractive to Americans in general and retirees in particular. Boquete is on the eastern slope of el volcán Barú, Panamá's highest peak and a long-dormant volcano; spread across the western slopes of Barú are strawberry, celery, onion, and cabbage fields, as well as the world renowned Finca Dracula, one of the largest collections of orchids, especially dragon orchids and teeny tiny miniature orchids, with blossoms only millimeters across... perhaps next year we can fit that in!

One group visited an organic coffee farm to learn about the ethics and economics of coffee and to have a coffee tasting... Finca Dos Jefes (=Two Bosses Farm) is one of the most stunning places Professor Cronin and I have ever seen... In the pictures the bamboo racks are for the initial drying of the coffee cherries; the coffee plants are the shrubs with shiny leaves.



What makes Grace smile?  
The lime tree and coffee plants at her side!





Cafés de la Luna, the organic coffees produced by this farm, are mostly for sale at the farm but are available in the US through <http://www.cafesdelaluna.com/>



We need to recommend the medium roast coffee: so sweet, so creamy, there is no need to add milk or sweetener! During the tasting, we all felt the dark roast needed that bit of help, but when we were served the medium roast... sublime! The cup to the right is not filled with coffee, but with *cáscara* tea, tea made with the dried skins of the coffee cherries. Low in caffeine, sweet, fruity, this was one of the day's surprise hits.

The final group did ziplining through the jungle canopy: more than 3 kilometers of cables running through exquisite jungle, with 13 canopy-height platforms along the way. Each harness was calibrated to each individual student's height and weight and the excursion was fully insured. The pictures that follow were taken by BOA staff with cameras on their helmets...











Everyone made it through the course and returned to the offices of BOA radiant. These adventurers refused to admit it was scary... the one scary thing that did happen was the discovery that one purse, carrying nothing but a passport, was misplaced. Despite all-out efforts by BOA to find the purse, the passport is gone. Fear not! We have already filled out the required passport replacement forms and have an appointment for Rachel at the US embassy in Panama City for first thing the morning we return there. I'll be going with her, with transportation offered by family friends in the city. I have to thank Rachel and her parents for their very calm response to this: it will work out, and there really is no need to panic. ¡Gracias!

Back at the hotel after our day of fun, we all crashed. With a bit too much sun for some, tired muscles for all, and a day of field work and more work in the hospital patio today, our beds were looking pretty good. A final image for the weekend: a spectacular thunderstorm, with lightening spread out across the sky over the Pacific: gorgeous!

¡Hasta la próxima!

Erika M. Sutherland

Today was a day of fieldwork. We have had some irregularities with the fieldwork placements; our partnerships were to be facilitated through the USF by the Ngäbe facilitator, Rosmery. However, it seems that only some of our partner organizations are fully prepared to partner effectively with us this summer. Part if this is, without question, an issue of a new set of partnerships, but part may point to a need to reevaluate some of those partnerships for the coming year. For this year, it has absolutely meant that we –and our students—have had to be creative about the ways in which we get the information we hoped for.



Today three teams started out at the hospital itself—Team Asthma connected with one of the doctors and all teams interviewed patients and family members waiting in the hospital’s two patios (the two smaller square openings in the Google Earth image of the hospital above; for reference, the patio garden we have been cleaning up is the one in the upper right). Interview is not an exact term here: students we asked to break into pairs or to work alone to greet people, strike up a conversation, and ask questions that got at their area of research. Given the double language barrier –students are mostly English-speaking, with limited Spanish (I need to say students have done very well and have learned to squeeze every drop of communicativity out of their Spanish here!), and patients are mostly Ngäbere-speaking, with limited Spanish as well... it’s extraordinary the extent to which conversations –real, meaningful, information-giving conversations—are happening. Today the maternal health team was startled to find one man calling his English teacher to come to the hospital to help facilitate the conversation... when the teacher arrived minutes later in a taxi, it did help ease the confusion and, perhaps as important, sealed a community connection with all involved.

Working with and in the hospital poses special challenges: the hospital is so very understaffed and resourced that they jump –even tug—at every opportunity for a helping hand. When I first took a group of students to work here in 2013, the doctors who were there had the students working directly with patients, a clearly unacceptable situation. Now that this course has been redesigned specifically as a Public Health course, the issues around equitable access to healthcare are front and center. One of these issues is the relationship between healthcare provider and patient: who are the healthcare providers? do patients always distinguish between different sets of scrubs and uniforms? how do power dynamics work in the hospital? how do language, race, gender, socioeconomic or legal status play into these dynamics? how is a teaching hospital different from a private hospital from a public clinic? do ethics rules apply equally everywhere and always? These are all tough questions; here students are getting a sense of how even more tough they are *in practice*.





My goal is to send students home from Panamá with a clear sense of the nature and consequences of disparities here—disparities that in many ways mirror disparities found in depressed, isolated, and marginalized communities in the US—and the conviction that they can use their diverse talents to reduce them. Not all of our students will go on into the field of public health, but all of them—all of us—can take these lessons and this critical vision to whatever profession and whatever community we choose.

It is interesting to me that the organization that was the most difficult for our students to research from Pennsylvania—ASASTRAN, the organization promoting traditional, herb-based medicines—has been the most effective partner on the ground here: we have met with a traditional midwife, an herbal doctor, a young specialist in herbal medicines, and we have had multiple conversations with people about the intersection of traditional and modern medicine. This particular collaboration even yielded many of the pant donations for the service project. Tomorrow the team will be meeting with one of the 2 doctors at the San Félix hospital to ask about those connections from his modern medical perspective. I think that the frustrations felt in the early stages of preparing for this project have eased if not melted away here.

Our last full day in San Félix and the comarca will include a visit to Nuestra Señora del Camino (=Our Lady of the Road), a refuge for women who have come down from the comarca in preparation for giving birth. There they are with in easy walk (20 minutes on nearly flat terrain) to the hospital; the refuge also offers humble lodgings for visiting students and doctors and houses a workshop for Ngäbe textiles and other crafts. We hope to speak with some of the women there and the nuns who tend to them during their stay. We also hope to make some purchases. Proartesana is the nonprofit organization that runs this workshop—their story of creating effective strategies for taking the talents and traditions of indigenous women to create marketable crafts is compelling. You can learn more about them here <http://www.proartesana.com/>. This site includes a national map—click on the dot near San Félix (one of the more western dots) and you will find Nuestra Señora del Camino.

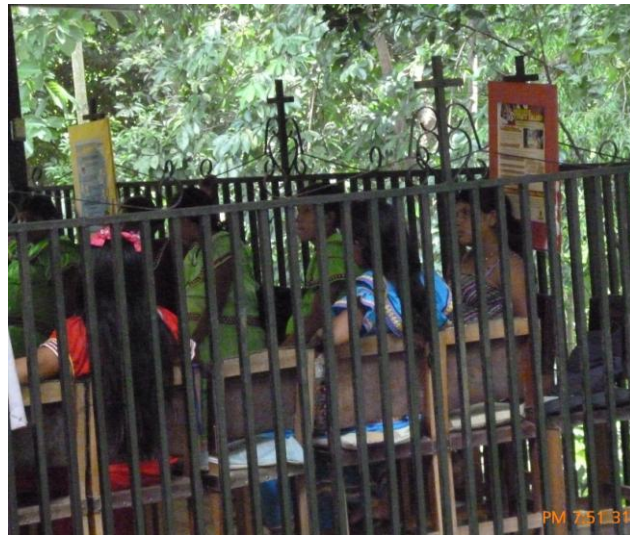
¡Feliz día a todos!

Erika M. Sutherland

¡Buenas tardes!

We are back in Panamá City— yesterday was a day of saying goodbye to our community partners, returning to David, and flying back to Panamá City.

The day before was a final day of field work, time to work on papers, and a visit to Nuestra Señora del Camino. The refuge there, for Ngäbe-Buglé women with high-risk pregnancies who can come down from the mountains in the weeks before they expect to give birth, is a lovely place, with gorgeous tropical plantings and walkways winding up and down hills covered in banana trees and other, mostly edible, plants, with murals everywhere, and tile mosaics that keep spreading, thanks to the efforts of volunteers that come from around the world to help out.



There are facilities for the women and other visitors (we *\*could\** have had the students stay there... but the dorms there are *\*pretty\** rustic... the beach resort was a better choice, we all agree); it's a blessing to see the help that women in need have there, but so sad to see how very great the need is and how the Ngäbe women seem to be so passive in their own situations...



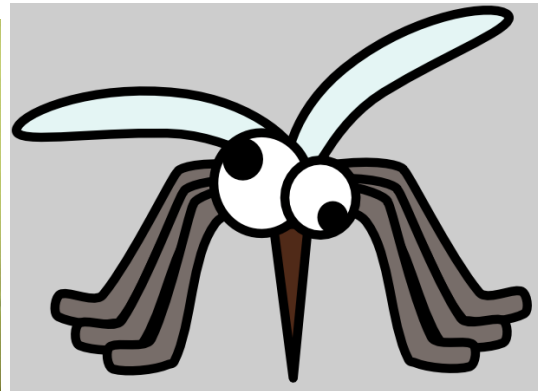
On our last day in *la comarca* and San Félix, we started out with a final site visit, this time to IDIAP, the governmental agency charged with supporting agriculture and livestock production; they work hand in hand with the Ngäbe medicinal plant organization ASASTRAN to support the efforts of Ngäbe farmers. Right now they are working on classifying and cataloguing the many species of medicinal and nutritional plants found in the comarca, with plans to publish a 200-page compendium linking plants with their native, local, Latin names and the ailments and conditions they are used to treat. Their work is important, fascinating, and a great candidate for next year's projects... but the students were tired, the room was hot, and the air conditioner broken. It was time to move on!



cardinal red baseball caps and shawls embroidered with a white-on-white version of the logo Sara W. designed for the trip.



Move on we did, stopping by the other agencies to say goodbye and to pass out thank you gifts:



Yes, the logo is a mosquito: our charm to keep us safe from zika. Despite the humor here, we have taken this risk quite seriously, with weekly discussions throughout the semester of the disease as more has been learned about it, an excellent public lecture organized by Professor Cronin on mosquitoes, the diseases they can spread, the means of transmission, and what it all means for the world and for our travelers... and long sleeves and pants and copious amounts of bug spray here.

We stopped at one of our lunch places to have cool drinks and there the student teams gave short final reports in Spanish—in Spanish that was greatly transformed from the first days here, I must say!



A final word on the *comarca*. We were lucky to work with two extraordinary women: Rosmery Pascacio and Olga Montero. Rosmery, who is by nature somewhat reserved, became quite emotional, even shedding tears at what the students had achieved.



This program in the *comarca* is still in its infancy, but with the help of these women we are well on the way to a solid, sustainable program offering benefits to both our students and the community. We look forward to working with Rosmery and Olga next year and for many years to come.

Back in Panamá City, the students visited two very different medical centers today. The clinic in the Las Mañanitas neighborhood was first on the agenda. Las Mañanitas is a working class neighborhood, with small and very simple homes that creep up the hill; the clinic serves a large, urban population with fairly reduced resources. This neighborhood and its health center have suffered frequent losses of water supply in recent years, a situation that is highly problematic for all involved.

After lunch at Centollo's Place, where AfroPanamanian cuisine (think rice with coconut, chicken and seafood with Caribbean spices) takes center stage, the group headed to el Centro Médico Paitilla, a very modern hospital affiliated with the Cleveland Clinic... and the place where Grace was born! The medical director there gave the tour; reports have it that he looked very much like a soap opera star, inspiring near-swoons among some of our travelers.

You may note that I am writing about the events of today in third person. That's because this morning, with the help of a family friend, I took Rachel to the US Embassy to help her with a new passport. The Embassy and Consulate are located in Clayton, an area that was part of the former American Canal Zone. It's an intimidating building, perched on top of a hill that has been cleared of jungle greenery,



surrounded by lots of security, and with a roof covered with satellite dishes. We had to leave nearly everything we had at the security gate: laptop, phones, my EpiPen, mints... I have to say that once we were there, though, it was pretty straightforward. At the counter we turned in the forms, were grumpily told we'd need a police report to leave the country, and were reminded that we should have brought Rachel's exit ticket. It was super helpful to have a driver waiting for us, because I needed to leave the grounds to get access to enough coverage to call our travel agent to have her e-mail the ticket directly to the consular officer. While I was doing this, Rachel was interviewed by the officer. Tickets received, it was only about 30 minutes more to get the passport. Next stop: the police office in downtown Panamá City to make the official police report of a lost passport, a report that is needed to pass through immigration on the way out... this took a grand total of 2 minutes and cost nothing at all. Very nice, no arguing or complication at all! Once this was done, Juan dropped Rachel off with the group and took me back to the hotel. I have been resting today, catching up on paperwork... and giving myself a tiny break from the very intense week of work and interpreting in the *comarca*.

This evening the student have a free evening to explore the city's amazing shopping and food options... the three professors are headed out to Jimmy's, a grill owned by Greek immigrants here... and my favorite fancier place here. I'll be dining with my cousins, Professors Cronin and Burger on their own... but we'll be picked up and dropped off together by my cousins.

Have a good evening!

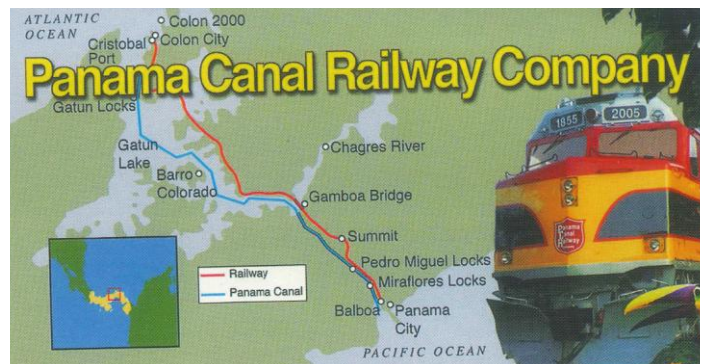
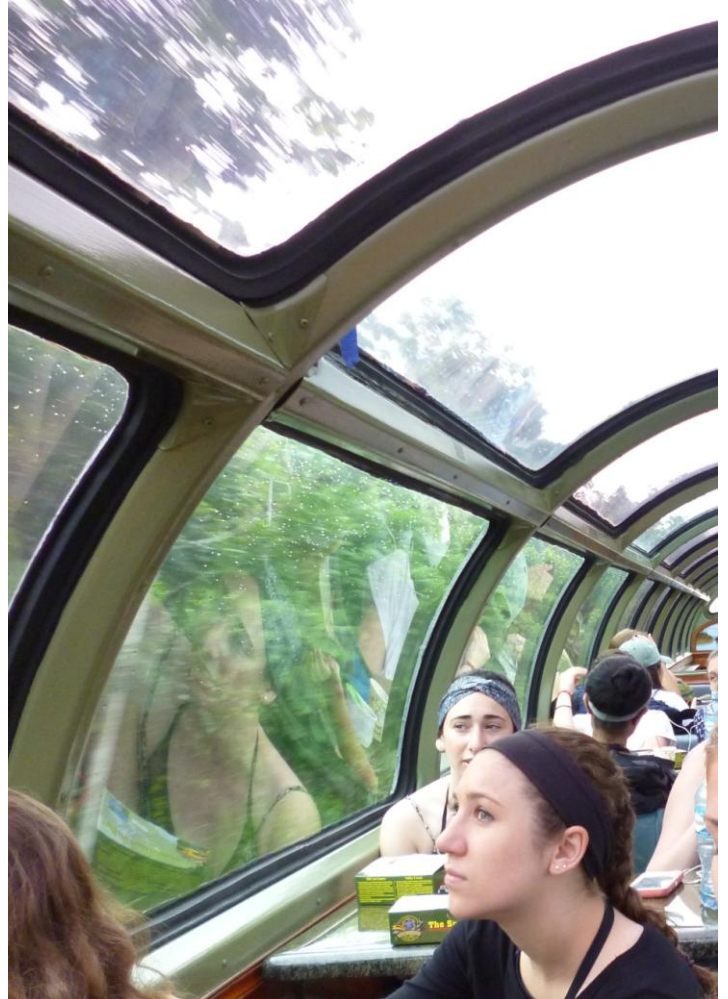
Cordially,

Erika M. Sutherland

¡Buenos días!

At this point everyone is back, hopefully rested, showered, laundered, and reconnected with the creature comforts of home. I wanted to share a rundown of our last day in Panamá with a few final thoughts.

On our last day we rose early to take the 7:15 am train from Panamá City to Colón. This ride is pretty amazing, you travel through the jungle alongside the Canal, with lush green all around you until you get to the areas that were flooded when the dams were built to supply water to the Canal. You can see the eerie tree stumps coming up through the water: they have been there for more than a hundred years now!



Our travels through Panamá were designed to present three facets of the country's extraordinarily diverse cultures: 1) the culture largely derived from the Spaniards who arrived in the early 16th century and continue to arrive even today, mixing with other indigenous, captive, and immigrant populations over the centuries to form the rich *mestizo*, *mulato* and a thousand other combinations that make up much of Panamá's population; 2) one of the multiple indigenous groups in Panamá, the Ngäbe-Buglé;



we also saw many Guna (also known as Kuna) and snagged lots of the Guna textile masterpieces, *molos*, in the capital; and 3) the *Afrodescendientes*, descendants of the Africans brought over in the early colonial period and those who arrived in the late 19<sup>th</sup>/early 20<sup>th</sup> century to work on the construction of the train lines and the Canal. Of the first group, significant numbers escaped into the tropical jungle and formed independent communities as *cimarrones*, mixing with the indigenous peoples in the east and developing a proud and fiercely independent culture.

One contemporary manifestation of this culture can be seen in the biannual Festival de Diablos y Congos, the Festival of Devils and Congos. In a pageant that takes over the central plaza of Portobelo, dancers and musicians dressed as Africans (or Congos) reenact their liberation from the Spanish conquistadors and slave owners (the Devils, in this representation—note the blond braids on this Diablo indicating his identity as a European); one singular character flits back and forth between the two groups with messages and, occasionally, tricks: he is the go-between, the cultural interpreter, he is Pajarito.



Lunch at Centollo's Place and our final full day in Panamá were focused on Afro Panamanian culture. Though Colón, a city made up nearly completely of Afrodescendientes at the Atlantic



terminus of the Canal, is widely regarded as a place of no touristic interest, we went there. We went not as tourists but as students of public health, looking at how history, economics, race, and culture play into healthcare delivery and health more broadly. We were joined on this trip by my friend Eric Blanquicet, a gifted percussionist with the Fundación Danilo Pérez and a proud *colonense*; at the Radisson, where we treated the students to a fancy hotel breakfast buffet, we were met with two of my brothers in law, Rolando and Alfonso Cooper; Rolando worked for many years at the Gatún Locks and both are treasure troves of Afro Panamanian history. You can hear the pride of place—and the typical blend of English and Spanish-- in *Colón, Colón*, a huge calypso hit by Lord Cobra in the 1970s: [https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qZV47omnV3s&list=PLyBn6Mr0ITBJ9mTEHE6dmfQpZ\\_jfe6QAT](https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=qZV47omnV3s&list=PLyBn6Mr0ITBJ9mTEHE6dmfQpZ_jfe6QAT)

From Colón we headed up the coast to Portobelo, a smaller city also largely made up of Afrodescendientes. There we visited the Cristo Negro, one of the few Black images of Christ dating from colonial times; the Cristo Negro is the object of veneration for millions of Panamanians and others, appealing especially to artists, gangsters (so they say!), and taxi drivers (it's rare to find a taxi in Panamá

without his image and/or his color, purple). One of my husband's daughters is a devotee, she has made the annual pilgrimage \*on foot\* from Colón to the shrine.



After this quick visit, it was time to change into swim suits and life jackets and off to Puerto Francés, a lovely private beach just beyond Portobelo Bay. The water was bathtub warm and crystal clear, there were multicolor fish... and though we did not see them we got to \*hear\* the howler monkeys in the jungle there. This is what they sound like:

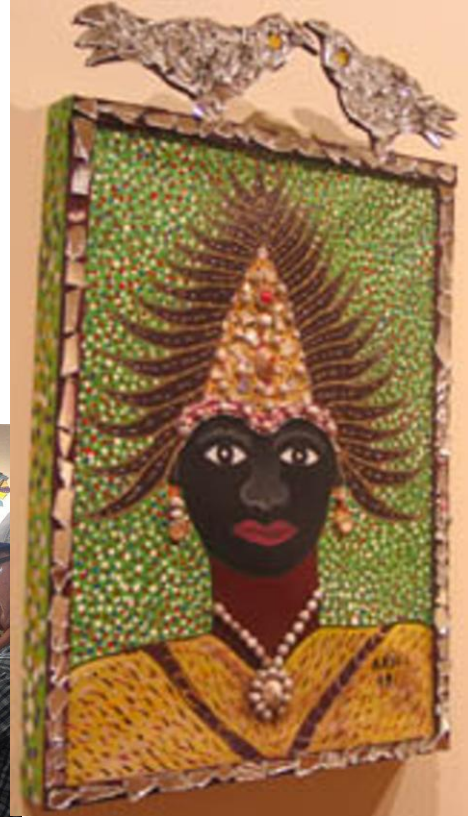
<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=-vxlNz8BihI>

It rained, a solid tropical downpour that we saw approach us from across the ocean. Half of the group headed back to Portobelo once the rain stopped, the other half stayed to float in the water and look for fish. I stayed with the second group, evidence of which decision you can see on my back in the last picture in the gallery.



Upon all of our return to Portobelo, we spent some time at the Casa Congo, home to the Taller Portobelo, the Portobelo Art Workshop. The painting I include here, by Ariel Jiménez, 'Pajarito', is an excellent example of the Congo style typical of the Taller Portobelo. As you can see, there are pieces of mirror incrustated in the image, both creating a frame for the painting and within the Congo king's regalia. The man's crown shows who he is; the blackened face celebrates the dark skin of the original Congos. Ariel joined the group for a brief talk on the Congo style and answered questions about the decisions he makes as an artist.





This visit ended with a late lunch/early dinner at Palenque, on their charming tiled patio overlooking the bay... Some of the students ordered the *Antillano* fried fish: they may not have been expecting the \*whole\* fish, stuffed with greens, fried... but I can absolutely say that Rachel R. ate her fish!



This seems like a good place to end the journal: In all, a good trip. No students got injured or sick, we got see a wide swath of Panamá and its health issues, and we spent time discussing how these issues connect with what goes on here in the US. Next year we hope to iron out some of the wrinkles we did encounter, but now we know it's a program well worth continuing!

Many thanks to the students for taking on this first-time adventure and to all of the parents who have been so supportive throughout. ¡Gracias mil!

Cordially,

Erika M. Sutherland