

Tuesday, February 2, 2021

WE Believe – Saint John
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Since the beginning of grade 6 at Hampton Middle School, I have known Mr. Foote as the advocator of the WE Movement within our small school. At first, I thought that what he was promoting, the stories he was telling, and the opportunities he worked out for us, were just short of amazing. I can remember one day in grade 7 thinking “who would go to the Amazon Rainforest? Isn’t that impossible? It’s supposed to be this magical land with vibrant birds, exotic mammals like monkeys and ocelots, and scary reptiles and insects. That’s where *Animal Planet* takes most of its’ videos- in the lungs of the planet.” And that’s all that I did know; that the Amazon is the lungs of our planet, that it has exotic animals, and that it is, in fact, a rainforest. All the years of being an *Animal Planet* binge watcher, and yet I still had not known much about it. But the more Mr. Foote talked, the more I began to listen. These trips where I could travel the corners of the world, and experience diverse culture and lifestyles, were right at my fingertips, and the ideas started to take over my mind.

By the end of grade 7, Mr. Foote had me fixated on the reality that I could not change the world, but rather change someone’s life, which in turn changes the world. I remember coming home from school one day, and running up the driveway, and told my mom “I’m going to Ecuador mom.” Looking back, it was definitely not how I should have planned to tell my mother, but we made it work out in the end. Soon enough I was planning clothing, travel supplies, flights, vaccinations, and trying to fill my head with all of the possibilities that could be reality when I entered this new country. There was lots of support to go around, from teachers, family, friends, neighbours, fellow classmates, and coworkers, most of them calling me crazy yet courageous for planning to travel across the world.

For fundraising, I did everything I could possibly think of that would make me money. These ideas included bottle drives, 50/50 draws, gift basket raffles, yard sales, cleaning cars for a commission, Bingo, painting nails for a commission, babysat, working extra shifts at my job, upcycling my clothing, etc.. The few summers leading up to my trip to Ecuador were crucial, as I did not have as much time during the school year, so most of my fundraising was done during the

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warmer months. Saving up around \$4,000.00 took a lot of work, but over the stretch of four years, I made many new friends, met people from around Canada and the United States, and learned the importance of saving money much before the deadline, which all made it worth it. WE Believe aided me with raising money, by paying for \$3,000.00 of the initial \$4,000.00, and I am forever grateful for this kind gift they gave me

All of the hard work put into my trip was well worth it. The culture, food, language, climate, altitude, tourist attractions, street vendors, architecture, diverse forest, and just the overall experience.

During my two-week stay in Ecuador, I stayed for the majority of my time in an Ecolodge on the Napo River, called Minga Lodge. This was my first time travelling internationally, and to be living in the Amazonian Rainforest for most of my stay, was an amazing experience. I will never be able to forget the sounds of birds, reptiles, insects, monkeys, and the occasional fish jumping, from the time I woke up in the morning, until the moment I fell asleep. Some of my favourite down-time was spent laying in my hammock right outside my room, after settling down for the night, and just listening to the day life wind down, and the nocturnal world come to life. There is also nothing more peaceful than doing yoga first thing in the morning, before the majority of your cabin mates wake up, where it's just you and the natural sounds of the rainforest. If there is one piece of advice that I could give to anyone asking on how to prepare themselves for this trip, it would be to make sure you have enough clothing, and then add more. Because, as one of my group leaders Chris had said, "nothing dries in the Amazon." I did not believe this statement until I got caught running out of clean socks, and eager to put on a fresh pair, I washed one in the sink, waited two days, and never saw it dry again until I got home. We also visited the local healer, experienced local foods, one of my favourites being a fish lasagna (don't knock it until you try it!) and most importantly, helped to dig the foundation for a small community, so they could have access to clean drinking water in the future. This was one of the most exciting parts for me, as we were actually getting our hands dirty and working to make a change.

The once in a lifetime experiences that I gained in Ecuador truly inspired me to do better in life and strive to help others succeed in making their own dreams a reality. My life was changed so drastically by the time I returned home, and I have never seen things the same way in my little New Brunswick home since my return. This change has been positive though, as a big part of this shift

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was understanding that not everyone is racing to become a billionaire, or a CEO of a major company, but rather they are just looking for happiness. I only truly realized this truth after visiting Ecuador and seeing just how happy people could be without some of the main tools and objects used daily in most houses within New Brunswick, Canada, and consider a part of what makes us happy.

The ways of life that I experiences in Ecuador has indeed impacted me so much so, that I have decided to return to the same "Neck of the woods" that I was in last time whilst living in the Rainforest and continue volunteering. This next journey in my life will be a longer duration, as I will be teaching English to mainly indigenous children within the surrounding communities. Because I will be a teacher, my volunteering duration will be at least 10 months long. To me, it sounds like 10 months of bliss, happiness, and rewarding experiences, because being a volunteer is something that always interests me deeply. As long as I am able, I will continue this way of living and giving back, in hopes to change the world of at least one person.

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