



**GUYANA
2016**

LOVE the Lord your God with all your heart and with all your soul and with all your mind. This is the first and greatest commandment. And the second is like it: **LOVE** your neighbor as yourself. - Jesus





Life often seems complicated. We live surrounded by never-ending distractions. But your purpose in life, like mine, can be boiled down to one question... **am I loving well at this very moment?**

My mom has gone on numerous missions trips over the past dozen or so years. Every once in a while, she would ask if I wanted to join her. I always said no. Her stories and pictures were amazing, but I never felt called to be a part of an international missions trip. But then, 2016 rolled around. I felt an impression on my heart that this was the year for me to go overseas. I called my mom and before I could get any words out, she asked if I wanted to go to Guyana, South America. I said YES!

GUYANA FUN FACTS

GUYANA is derived from an Indigenous Amerindian language and means
“LAND OF MANY WATERS.”



We speed-boated down a portion of **the longest river in the country, the Essequibo** (628 miles long). This is at the mouth of the river as it leads into the Atlantic ocean.

Guyana is the only South American nation with English as the official language. • The phrase “just now” can literally mean just now, or it can mean 5 hours or 5 days. Time is relative in Guyana. • The British assumed control of Guyana in 1796, and in 1966, Guyana achieved independence from the United Kingdom. **2016 is their 50th anniversary of independence.** • St. George’s Anglican Cathedral, one of the tallest wooden church structures in the world, is located in the capital of Georgetown.

source: Wikipedia & locals

GUYANA FUN FACTS

The local climate is tropical and generally hot and humid, though moderated by northeast trade winds along the coast. **There are two rainy seasons, and our travels were during one of them.** Thank goodness for banana tree branches. Nature's umbrella.



Guyana has one of the largest unspoiled rainforests in South America, some parts are almost inaccessible by humans. We ventured two miles into those inaccessible parts. **Two people on our team got lost in the jungle.** My mom was one of them. Yes, I got nervous. Yes, I prayed. Thank God they were found!



Guyanese religious affiliation indicates that approximately **57% of the population is Christian, 28% Hindu and 7% Muslim, while 4% of the population did not profess any religion.**

We crossed over the Demerara Harbour Bridge, the fourth-longest floating bridge in the world. • The present population of Guyana (799,613) is racially and ethnically heterogeneous, with ethnic groups originating from India 43.5%, Africa 30.2%, mixed heritage 16.7%, and indigenous or aboriginal peoples (Amerindians) 9.1% • Life expectancy is 67 years for both males and females. • Guyana, unfortunatley, has the highest suicide rate in the world.

source: Wikipedia & locals

Eight ladies and three men decided to take a trip to Guyana, South America. To share God's love. I didn't know what to expect, but I wanted to join.

On Friday, June 24, we headed out to begin the adventure. For those of you familiar with the 80's movie "Planes, Trains and Automobiles" starring Steve Martin and John Candy, this had some similar vibes. Departure was Michigan, USA—car, van, plane (OH), plane (GA), plane (FL), plane (Trinidad), bus, ferry, taxi, speedboat—eventual arrival to Manawarin Village, Guyana, South America.

The afternoon ferry we were scheduled to take was out of commission, so the first night we got a whopping three hours of sleep before awakening to catch the early morning ferry. The speedboats we later took were so bogged down with supplies that we had to stop numerous times to shift the weight around, get a new propeller, scoop up and pour out water collecting in the boats, and eventually leave supply bags at a river house for someone to bring to the village the next day.

After being on the river an hour or so, the rain clouds rolled in and we took advantage of this three-minute warning to quickly pull out and put on our handy-dandy ponchos. I would highly recommend not purchasing your poncho from the Dollar Store as I soon discovered those are basically giant trash sacks that the wind will inevitably shred to pieces. But unaware at the time, I strategically put on my yellow trash sack poncho and wrapped it over the luggage in my lap. Sunglasses were kept on to prevent the stinging rain from damaging my eyesight. And while shivering as the wind blew through my rain-soaked body, I closed my eyes and questioned "What have I done?" Partly sarcastic, partly genuine concern for what lay ahead. The Arrested Development line made famous by Gob would be quite appropriate for how I was feeling at that moment—"I've made a huge mistake."

After three and a half hours on the river, of what is usually a one and a half hour trip, we pulled up to the dock at the Village of Manawarin. A few of the locals—adults and kids—were there with smiles on their faces to welcome us. I quickly forgot that just hours earlier I questioned why I was there. They are why I was there.

Thirty minutes after our arrival, the second speedboat was yet to be seen. A little apprehension came upon me as I doubted that having a missing team leader was

the best way to start a missions trip. We gave them a little more time and after an hour or so some locals went up the river on a search. The sun was now setting. Two hours later. In the dark. They came back. The other speedboat, which had been found tied to a tree on the side of the river as the propeller had quit working, was in tow. Whew, thank God!

We made a few half mile roundtrips from the dock to our living quarters and were eventually greeted by three softball-sized tarantulas and a five-inch long roach-type insect, the latter meandering along the base of my soon-to-be-bed. When my mom travels to Africa, she pitches a tent in the middle of the bush so I was quite ecstatic to shine my flashlight into a room and see a wooden bed frame, 4-inch mattress, mosquito netting with only a few holes and a stand to drape our humidity-filled damp clothes. Buckets were lined up outside to catch rain water, and even some PVC were strung together to pipe the rain water into oversized barrels for daily use. I've gone rustic camping before so this seemed doable. Granted, I only camp for about three days at a time and have access to a stand-up shower so ten days showering with baby wipes and a bucket proved a little more rough.

Before heading to bed, I walked out into the open field and stared up at the sky, lit by what must have been thousands upon thousands of stars. I was blown away. By the beauty. The peace. The silence. The complete solitude.

It's quite mind boggling to think no matter where you stand on this earth, when you look up into the night's sky we all see the same stars.

With my head lifted towards the heavens, I reflected also on the fact that no matter where you stand... God is God.

I headed back to the community housing and up to bed.

A clanging orchestra of rain pelting against the tin roof woke me up in the middle of the night. This would become a regular occurrence. And by the end of the trip, I had become immune to the ruckus.

Our room was positioned on the sunrise side so the heat and brightness woke

me up each morning. I was never able to find the snooze button on the sun's alarm clock, but that didn't stop me from trying. The days kicked off with a hearty breakfast—scrambled eggs with all kinds of veggies mixed in (green beans were probably my favorite), fried plantains and a variety of breads. I found Guyanese food to be quite delicious.

A solid breakfast was most appreciated as we started our days with manual labor—building the frame structure for a future missionary house. I imagined hammering things, holding things in place while someone else was hammering, walking on the wood beams ('cause it's exciting to be in the air), bringing wood from a pile to a person needing it, etc. Those are the kinds of things they've let me do at Habitat for Humanity.

This was a different kind of construction project. We started by walking about two miles to the build site. You know when your grandparents would tell you they walked to school barefoot, in five feet of snow, uphill, both ways, remember that? This was close. I don't understand how, but no matter where we were heading it always seemed to be uphill. In 100 degree weather. With 90% humidity. Fortunately, the rain typically held off until late morning. And by that time, we were hot and ready for the somewhat refreshing lukewarm water pouring down from the sky.

Once at the build site, I noticed the excavation had been rough—basically a jungle lot that had been cleared by chopping down the trees and burning the stumps. There was a small pile of long wood pieces that looked like they could be used for framing. Small was the key word. There were lots more wooden beams needed. And we were to be the laborers. We got organized and a few locals instructed us to follow them into the jungle where we would be carrying out the rest of the wood. Sure, no biggy, I can carry wood.

Into the jungle we did go. Many pieces had already been cut which would seem beneficial as we could immediately get moving with the transport. But when eighteen-foot long, six-inch thick blocks of wood have been cut and left out in the Guyanese jungle, there's a high probability they're going to be water-logged and weigh a gazillion pounds. It took six ladies to carry one of these giant wooden beams. It would be one thing as a team to pick up a heavy block of wood and carry

it down a paved path; it's a whole other story for a team to pick up a water-logged post, carry it through an unmarked curvy path in the jungle stepping over fallen trees, getting tripped by vines, and taking the curve in the front while sweeping the team in the back off the path into the jungle foliage.

The best way I can describe how it felt to transport these giant wooden beams is to imagine yourself putting on a blind-fold, spinning around a bat five times, grabbing a cinderblock on each forearm and stumbling half a mile through the woods, in 100 degree, rainy weather. It was on this day, and if I'm honest, on future construction days as well, that I once again quoted Gob—"I've made a huge mistake."

Each day around 2 pm, we trekked back to our living quarters to put on dry clothes and get ready to spend the afternoon with the kids who would be wrapping up school around 3 pm. Time was spent singing songs, acting out Bible stories, and playing Red Rover, Duck-Duck-Goose and other games that transported me back to my childhood. When I saw the smiles on their faces, slapped them high-five, danced like Elaine from Seinfeld (that always made them laugh), and tried my best to memorize names, any of the lacking comforts of back home were completely forgotten. This is why I was here. And it was completely worth it.

That was a typical day.

Nights varied from having dinner with the teachers, attending the local church, visiting with village families, providing medical supplies to the clinic, and building room partitions for the school.

After a week of construction and enjoying new friendships, it was time to pack our bags and head back to the states. As we started the long journey, I was quiet and contemplative. My exhaustion had caught up with me. Not having projects to build and children to keep me energized, my body quickly depleted. I was exhausted. I was dirty. My ankles and feet were extremely swollen from mosquito bites. Going from the comforts of America to a small village in a third-world country and back to America was a lot to process. True culture shock.

We take so much for granted. Central heating and cooling. An inside toilet

that flushes. A shower we can stand under as it washes the filth off our skin. A refrigerator that keeps food cold and fresh. A car with AC that can get us anywhere we need to go. All those blessings, yet we're so often discontent. I never heard one complaint from a Guyanese person the entire time I was there. Now, I'm not saying they don't complain. But I do think there is a high probability that they have a very different perspective than many of us who live in America. Could simplicity of living offer something more? Now, don't get me wrong, I believe in striving for your best life, but wouldn't it be amazing to live satisfied with your current state? To be happy with what you have? To be happy with where you are? For all we have is this moment. Right here. Right now. I choose how I respond in each moment. I choose my attitude. Always.

I woke up that first morning back, having slept twelve hours straight, my feet still perched up on two pillows in an effort to reduce the swelling of my mosquito-bitten ankles. Staring at the ceiling I was consumed with gratitude when a thought popped into my head. "Maybe next year I'll go back." What? Where did that thought come from? Sure, it was an amazing experience but it was also the roughest ten days of my life. Physically, mentally, emotionally. But I sensed my spirit saying, "this is what it's all about."

This Guyana experience reminds me...

...to not get bogged down by life's distractions, but rather live simply in the here and now.

...to recognize the blessings I have in my life and live with a grateful heart.

...to seek out new, and even uncomfortable, experiences; being willing to challenge my perspective as that is the key to personal growth.

...lastly, and most importantly, the purpose of life is to love well.

I will keep Guyana with me always. And hopefully, Guyana will keep a part of me.

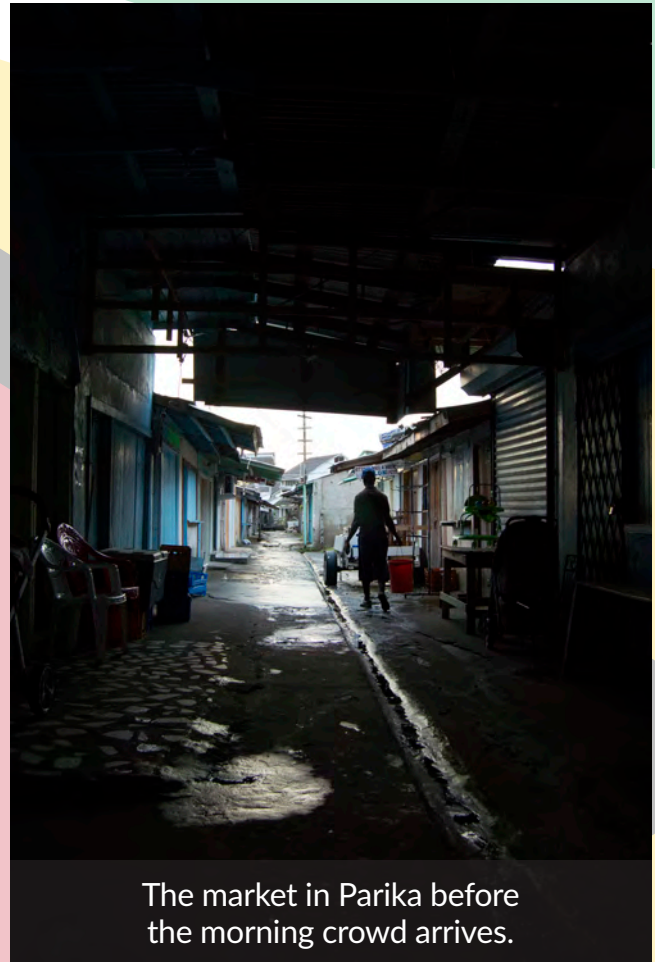


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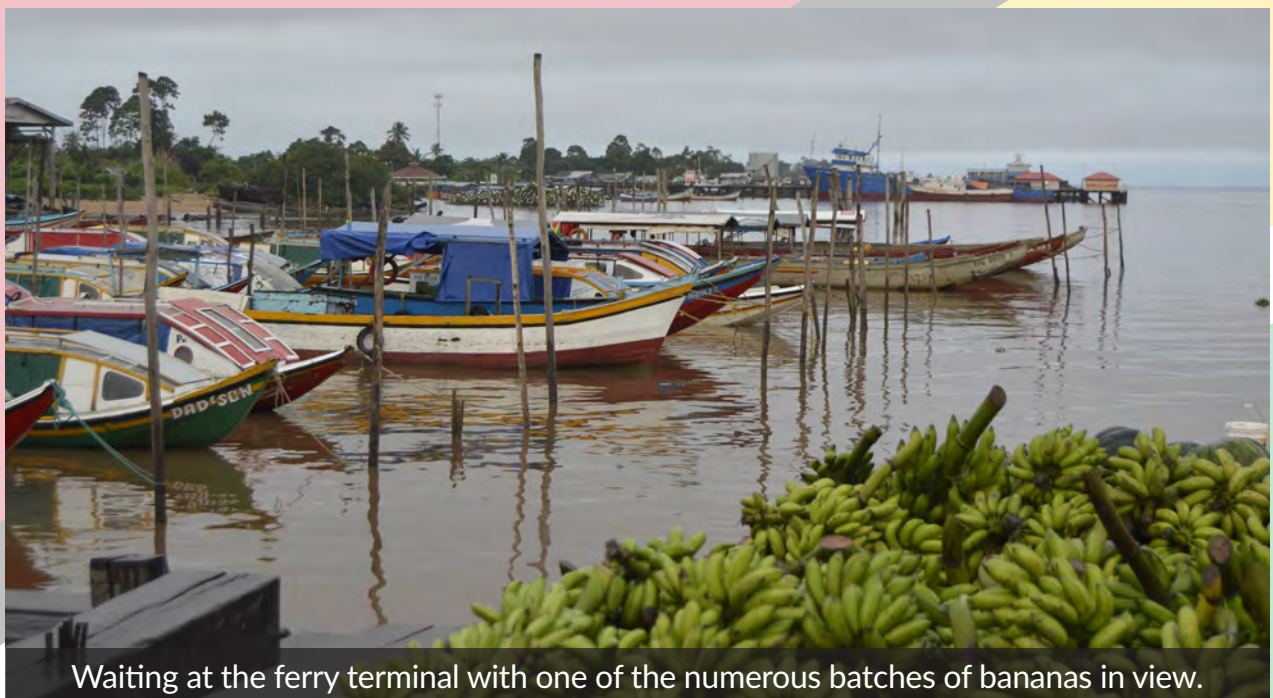
The TRAVELS



Adios Miami



The market in Parika before the morning crowd arrives.



Waiting at the ferry terminal with one of the numerous batches of bananas in view.



DRIVERS: Yield for random animals on the street.



Their speedboat had a cover. Lucky them!

The KIDS



Irwin had more energy than any kid I've ever met. He kept me tired.



Tenri, Colin & Quincy. I love all of these Guyanese kiddos.



Nix and I share a birthday.



Someone's deep in thought and it's not me.



Joking with the kids under the shade of the bamboo tree.



Group selfie. They're all cousins.



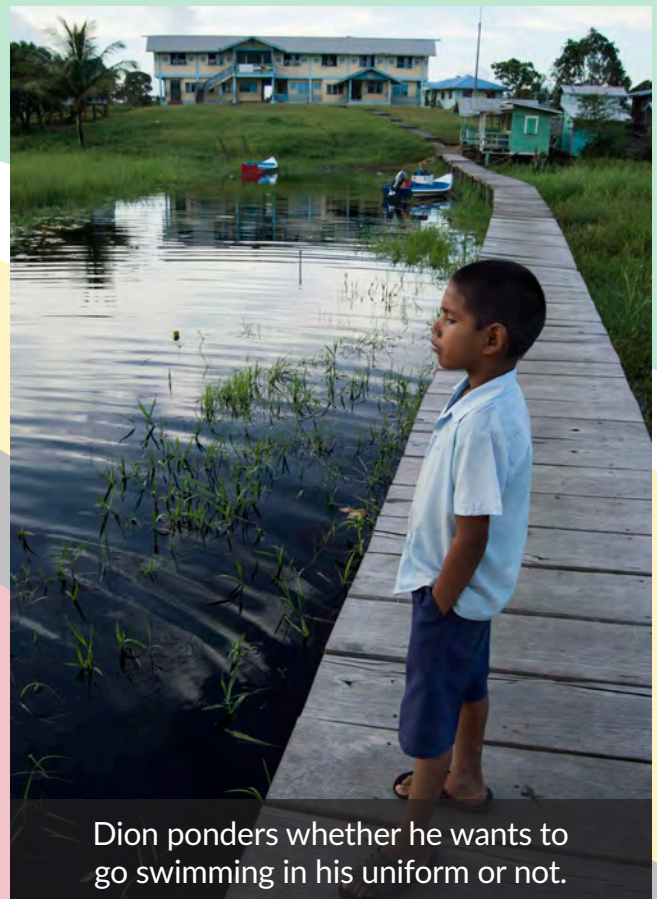
Reading time with our host's kids.



Colin and a younger classmate before school starts.



Ricardo takes a break from swimming in the river.



Dion ponders whether he wants to go swimming in his uniform or not.



Friends relax on the dock.



Kadar builds up strong muscles everyday. He can even beat me at arm wrestling. He's 10.



Emily & Tianna strike a pose.



Sitting on the dock of the bay, excuse me, river.



Some kids row up to 3 hours to school each way. I'm not sure how far "QJ" has to go.



Siblings Ladeesa & Nick

The CONSTRUCTION



Heading out to the work site.



Pastor gives instruction on the build site of the future missionary house.



Let's get this party started.



Oh so much heavier than it looks.



Cut a tree down. Cut the wood beams needed. Carry to build site. Repeat.



You couldn't drink enough to stay hydrated. I went to the bathroom only twice a day.



I needed a break.



Selfie with my mama.



Measuring for partitions.



The framing is almost complete for the missionary house.

The AREA



A local family on our village outing.



Rueben, another host, always prepared.



Tranquil moments prevail in Manawarin.



Along the 2 mile path to the work site.



Blacka offers fresh coconut water to quench our thirst on a hot day.



Rueben's sister and great-nephew.



Out visiting in the village.



The making of cassava bread, a staple in their diet. Poisonous unless handled correctly. I wasn't a fan. Tasted like bitter styrofoam.

GUYANA 2016



My heart's desire is for people to experience God's love
and understand who they are as a child of our Creator God.

Have a blessed day!