

Lindsey Engelman comes from Austin Texas. She graduated with a Bachelor of Arts in Legal Studies from the University of California, Santa Cruz. Before coming to the GAP program, Lindsey worked in a needle exchange program in Santa Cruz and she writes this about that experience:

At the Exchange I was constantly around people who, despite the fact that some of them may have lived down the street from me, lived in an entirely distinct cultural reality. Though people who came through the exchange were from all walks of life, by-and-large they were poor and often homeless. A significant portion of the people were mentally ill, many were part of gangs, and the majority spent much of their time in and out of prison. The Needle Exchange worked out of the center located downtown, at remote locations (such as behind the bushes down the street from a shelter), Street Outreach, and home deliveries.

I see anything that opens your mind and breaks down stereotypes that you hold as a positive thing. Addicts are probably the group society feels most comfortable stereotyping or dehumanizing, but, as in most any group, it is impossible to do once you actually get to know individuals. I learned so many peoples' stories, perspectives, and ideas about the world that were so different from my own. I think it is rare when people truly interact with people outside of their cultural norm, especially when they are in their own community. I saw that as a great privilege of working at the Exchange.

Some of the biggest challenges working at the Needle Exchange were in my first few weeks there. The lifestyles people lead and the agony they at times put their bodies through can be shocking. At first it was hard not to cringe when someone rolled up their sleeve and showed me an abscess or pulled out a dirty syringe. It was an adjustment daily seeing some of the harsh realities of the intravenous drug using community.

Also, working at the Needle Exchange was at times very emotionally challenging. There were times when I would get used to seeing the same participants almost everyday, and then suddenly they no longer come to the center. Then I am left to wonder – did they move, get clean, go to jail, or are they in some more serious trouble? Sometimes you would find out what happened to them and sometimes you never would. Working at a Needle Exchange requires a lot of compassion and understanding. It is inevitable that you begin to form some level of relationship with those you are working with. But, at the same time, you cannot let yourself get too attached or you won't be able to do the work. Creating this balance is a constant challenge.

Asked what she might plan to do after she returns from her work as an accompanier in Guatemala, Lindsey wrote:

I am extremely interested in community organizing, public policy, and international politics. I plan on applying to public policy school that focuses either on sustainable development or international politics shortly after I return. I feel that the experience of being an accompanier will greatly enhance my ability to understand issues involving international public policy, and how cross-cultural/international organizing functions. In fact, one of the aspects of NISGUA that I find most appealing is that it connects you to ways to advocate for positive policies towards Guatemala. This is most definitely something I will plan on doing upon my return.