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Asking Questions to Get Answers

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Dr. Anne Dahlman

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Asking Questions to Get Answers

Learning about the important cultural aspects of Colombia is something I have strived to do since I arrived back in December. Through increasing my interactions with others, both in Spanish and in English, and by asking questions of those individuals around me, it allowed me to see Colombia in a new light. I developed an increased understanding of the complexity of elements important to citizens of Colombia such as its history, cultural values, politics, and the demographics of the country.

From having engaged conversations with a professor at my university in Colombia, I learned that Colombia has a very interesting past. Viviana Gomez told me that there are many important violent events that mark time in the country's history; to begin, Colombia was colonized by Spain in 1525. Then, in the early 1800s, there were many disputes and changes of governmental power between the liberals and the conservatives. Throughout the next 60 years, two major battles were fought: The War of the Thousand Days and the Civil War, where nearly 500,000 people died. The next important event that I learned about was the "gaitanismo," which was a leadership movement by Jorge Gaitan, who was famous for reporting attacks against peasants, the Banana Massacre, and for demanding the government to stop politically prosecuting people; Gaitan was also followed by many students, peasants, house wives and workers. Then on April 9th, 1948, a major event called the "Bogotazo" occurred; this was the murder of the liberal leader by Juan Roa. After the murder, the citizens of Bogotá went crazy

and lynched the murderer. The disorder and revolution took control of the capital city and the liberal people began to break into public places to cause damage. From listening to historical events, I have learned that much of Colombia's historical events are marked by violence and crime.

From interactions with others, I have learned that Colombians have many cultural values. To begin, the Catholic religion is very important to the people of Colombia, especially older generations who practice strict Catholicism. The Virgin Mary can be seen in public places all over the country, even though there is a separation of church and state. For me, it is also very evident here that family is a very important part of their cultural values; families gather almost weekly for celebrating birthdays, holidays, or just to spend time with each other. I go out to dinner or to a family reunion almost weekly with my host family. Besides with family, I have also noticed that Colombians are in general very familiar with their friends. Although Colombia is in general a poor country, the people of Colombia are always making the best of their circumstances and looking for ways to improve their lives; for many Colombians, it is important for to work hard, so they can have a better life for their children. Lastly, education is very important here. Public education is free for all students and but a lot of families try to but their children in private schools where the education is better and the environment is much safer. Through my experiences, I have been able to learn that the people of Colombia are very sympathetic and value their relationships with others.

The current politics of Colombia is very unique to the country. The country is run democratically, which grants the people the right to life, education, and work; however, the government is organized with both social and political power. Colombia also has a constitution installed that is similar to that of the United States, which helps to grant the people their rights;

however, often times the country is run in a socialistic manner. Currently, with recent political help from the president Juan Manuel Santos, the country has had many improvements within the last few years. Before then, I was told by my Colombian friends that it was very unsafe to travel across the country or out of major cities due to gangs; for this reason, there was a fear instilled within the people and many did not feel safe in their own country homes. To try to help solve this political battle for power between the Gorilla, a gang in Colombia, and the government, Juan Manuel Santos signed a piece treaty with the Gorilla who are now recently welcomed back into the capital city after many years of exclusion. Although there have been improvements in safety, road conditions, and government, there are still many problems politically that keep this country from excelling as told by citizens. Viviana Gomez, a Spanish professor at Universidad de la Sabana, stated that public transportation and transportation in general still lack the efficiency to support a capital city of eight million people; bus prices have risen but very little improvements are being done which has led to citizens beginning to protest the public transportation. I have experienced this first hand while riding in Transmilenio with everyone being packed in the big buses like sardines. Another important political aspect of Colombia is its exportation and boarders with other countries. Politically for Colombia, exportation of coffee, emeralds, and leather are very important for their economy; they also heavily depend on the worth of the US dollar and oil production in other countries like Venezuela. I have seen this relationship while exchanging money where \$1 is equal to 3,450 Colombian pesos; this is the highest the US dollar has ever been in Colombia. Overall, politic aspects have improved within the country recently but there are still many things that need to be changed.

Finally, the demographics of the country are very important for the country and its people. Throughout history, Colombia has been divided into 32 departments and now has a

population of 48 million with eight million people in the capital city of Bogotá alone. Colombia has many important cities but the five most important cities in Colombia include the capital Bogotá, along with Medellin, Cali, Barranquilla, and Cartagena. Colombia also has two main seasons, which are seen as rainy seasons and are important for production of many of their exportations: café and flowers. Because Colombia is a tropical country these times of rainfall are also very important for the countries water supply; due to a lack of rain recently, there has been a water restriction applied to every family, and a fine is given to those families who exceed their water limit. Besides this, Colombia also has many different climates due to the vast array of landscapes. For example, the capital city is surrounded by the Andes Mountains while over 40 percent of the country in the south is made up of the Amazon. Finally, Colombia is important demographically because it has boarders with Venezuela, Peru, Ecuador, and Brazil, has coasts with the Pacific Ocean and with the Caribbean Sea, and also is the country that connects both Central and South America. After having lived here for two months, I have seen how important the demographics of the country are to the people of Colombia.

Overall, I was very amazed with how much I learned about Colombia just by simply asking questions and engaging in deep conversation with citizens of the country. Asking questions about the history, cultural values, politics, and demographics of the country was a great way to help me learn more about Colombia, the people, and differences between the United States.

Works Cited

Viviana, Gomez. Personal interview. 17 Feb. 2016.