

Summer in Mexico: A Reflection on Legal Service Careers in Spanish-Speaking Communities

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Morse Family and Community Public Policy Final Report

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After work one day, I walked to a coffee shop that I often visited. There was a slight drizzle and a dim light peeking out from behind the mountains. As I entered the restaurant, I ordered my coffee and went to take a seat. Once I sat down, I started to make conversation with the woman sitting next to me as I often did. I'm sitting in the Cafe de Barro in the center of Oaxaca de Juárez in early July of 2021. I'm talking to this woman--Maria--about my time in Oaxaca: the trips I've taken, the place I'm staying, where I want to visit. Then, she asks me what I'm doing with my life. I tell her that I'm in Oaxaca to serve as an intern at a human rights organization. She's intrigued and she presses further: "So what do you want to be?" I say that I'll be going to law school in the US next year, and that I want to be an immigration attorney. At that point, she looked at me concerned: "As an attorney," she asked, "do you want to work for us or against us?" I told her, "My job isn't to work for you or against you, it's to work with you." This response has been shaped by my experiences learning about leadership and advocacy at K-State. To me, service isn't about saving people. Service is about using the skills you have to do good in the world. It's about recognizing the unnecessary challenges that people face and doing your best to change these barriers by working within the affected community. With this mindset, I used this summer experience to learn about communities in Mexico, the Spanish language, and service careers in the law.

### **The City of Oaxaca de Juárez**

Oaxaca de Juárez is a city centrally located in the southern state of Oaxaca in the country of Mexico. The population of this capital city is just over 300,000 people. The state of Oaxaca is the most diverse in Mexico in the number of indigenous and ethnically diverse backgrounds represented. Indigenous culture is largely present in the community and the day-to-day life of a Oaxacan resident. This is one of the reasons that I chose to spend my summer in Oaxaca. The

state has many unique foods, languages, and cultural traditions that I wanted to learn more about from their community. While living in Oaxaca de Juárez, I learned a lot about Mexican culture as well as characteristics of Latin American communities. This location was the perfect place to spend my summer, and I am incredibly grateful for my time in Oaxaca.

### **La Defensoría de los Derechos Humanos Del Pueblo de Oaxaca**

The office that I worked for was a human rights ombuds office. This means that the attorneys worked to rectify human rights violations that were not resolved by the government. As a governmental office, the main job of the organization was to oversee the governments' actions and to enact remedial measures to correct them. In order to address all claims brought to the office, there were many departments that were dedicated to specific issues. While the office had several satellite working locations all over the state and the city, I was able to work at the central headquarters with the lead attorneys from each department.

### **Forced Indigenous Displacement**

This work that I did for the DDHPO happened mostly in the department of forced indigenous displacement. This was a common phenomenon where indigenous communities were forced out of their hometowns by rival communities, political groups, or the local government. While this is fairly common in rural Mexico, it's especially common in Oaxaca. With over 570 municipalities, 476 are communities with indigenous or historically marginalized heritages. Because of this diversity, many communities live in conflict with one another which often results in the forced displacement of communities. The office would take statements and reports from those who experienced displacement, then they would work with local institutions to offer solutions. These solutions often involved securing food, water, and shelter for the displaced, returning the community members to work and school, and finding a safe way for them to return

home. In most cases, this was a process that took several years and had a massive impact on the lives of those displaced. In doing this work, I recognized the factors surrounding forced migration, and I came to understand some of the emotional and mental impacts of being forced out of your home and away from your community.

### **A Typical Day**

My typical day started by waking up and making breakfast with the Oaxacan woman I lived with. Then, I would get ready to walk to work and start my day. My walk to work was about thirty minutes, which was a nice walk in the cool Oaxacan summer weather. Once I arrived at work, I would usually make pleasantries with other employees and then begin reading cases. After a few hours, I would check with the head attorney of my department and discuss what I had learned from that case. If the case wasn't resolved yet, he would also ask me about my recommendations for what the office should do. I enjoyed engaging in this process of reading cases and analyzing them with the help of program staff. After work, I would normally go to a new restaurant to find something to eat for dinner. With the rest of my day, I would either explore a new part of the city, go shopping at one of the markets, or work on homework for my online classes. On the weekends, I took advantage of my time off to travel around the city and the state. Because of this free time, I was able to see the historic and iconic sites of Oaxaca.

### **Community Through COVID-19**

During the summer of 2021, the world was still experiencing the COVID-19 pandemic. As someone that wants to make positive impacts on communities, I greatly considered the risks of traveling during the pandemic. The last thing that I would have wanted to do was put Oaxacans at risk if I carried the virus with me. Because of this, I decided that I would only travel if I had received the vaccine, which I did receive in March of 2020. With this vaccination, I felt

comfortable enough to travel while still observing the necessary precautions of social distancing and masking. Once I was in Oaxaca, I noticed that perceptions of COVID were a lot different there than they were here in the US. For example, many people in my home state of Kansas were very relaxed with wearing masks and receiving the vaccine. However, in Oaxaca, it seemed that the population had more risk averse and communitarian ideals. Because of this, I observed that most residents wore masks and socially distanced themselves any time that they were out of their homes. As a visitor in this community, I found it necessary to follow suit in order to respect the customs and safety of those around me.

### **My Translation Project**

After living and working in the community for two months, I decided to take on a project. I recognized that the organization DDHPO had a group of stakeholders that they weren't able to reach through just the Spanish language. Oaxaca is a growing hotspot for tourists, and visitors to the state can also be victims of human right violations. Seeing this need, I met with the DDHPO department of communications to see what they thought about my idea. I wanted to translate some of their materials and handouts to English and then take them to places like hotels and hostels where many people speak English. They saw this as an impactful project for a student like myself because they hadn't considered the impact of human rights violations on foreigners and they rarely had people working in their organization that spoke English. After they gave me the approval, I began translating their messages about how to interact with the police, how to file a claim at the DDHPO, and more topical content like understanding LGBTQ+ rights and respecting indigenous culture. As a Spanish student, I found this to be a very fulfilling use of my skills as I was able to provide this service to an organization and their stakeholders.

### **Final Reflections**

In reflecting on my experience in Oaxaca, I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity to travel and serve a Mexican community. As someone who would like to work with Spanish-speaking immigrants in my future career, it is important to me that I have experiences living and working in Spanish-speaking communities. This learning experience was the most impactful time of my four years at K-State, and I look forward to carrying this with me as I approach a legal career in service.