

Transcript of Interview with Sarah Uhlig by Wilzave Quiles

Interviewee: Sarah Uhlig

Interviewer: Wilzave Quiles

Date: 03/14/2020

Location (Interviewee):

Location (Interviewer):

Abstract:

During this interview, I am talking with my classmate Sarah Uhlig about our experience in the program of Empower: Ecuador, since we were both on it together. The main purpose of this interview was to get an insight into what it was for another student like me, to have missed a trip to Ecuador due to COVID-19. Just to clarify, this was not any trip. This was a missionary trip for which we were preparing ourselves to go for most of the semester. As the trip was canceled, we recognized that the program was much more than just traveling to Ecuador. Rather, the program was about our personal lives and the way in which we relate to others around us that are in different seasons and circumstances in life. Another very important thing, was self-reflection into how we were utilizing our gifts and field of interest to not only serve others but be present with others. Many things were learned from this course and Sarah, will be sharing with you her experience despite the challenges and messiness that COVID-19 brought.

Wilzave Quiles 0:02

Okay, so we are recording. Again, thank you, Sarah for saying yes, and being in this interview with me. It's going to be for the archive and the public history class that I have. This archive, hopefully- we hopefully- we hope that it will serve for the future generations. Obviously, we don't want any, like COVID-19 happen again. But there is a possibility. So making sure that other people have like, our experience there for them to learn and maybe do a better than us or learn that it's not- everything is not like, just dark, you know, there are good things that come from it.

Sarah Uhlig 0:45

Yes.

Wilzave Quiles 0:47

So yeah, I will start with the questions. And the first one is, how long have you been a student at St. Mary's University? And what are you studying?

Sarah Uhlig 0:58

So I've been a student at St. Mary's since fall 2018. I have been studying English and theology for my undergrad, and then I'm studying English, literature and language for my master's degree.

Wilzave Quiles 1:12

So you're going to continue here until you finish your master's, right?

Sarah Uhlig 1:15

Yes, and that, by August 2022. All of it will be done by then.

Wilzave Quiles 1:23

That's great. I'm excited for you.

Sarah Uhlig 1:25

Thank you,

Wilzave Quiles 1:26

That's a great opportunity to just do everything at the same time.

Sarah Uhlig 1:31

Thank you.

Wilzave Quiles 1:33

And what is the program of Empower: Ecuador according to your experience?

Sarah Uhlig 1:41

I definitely feel like the Office of Community Engagement allowed students to experience the non-typical mission experience. We get to learn about the people themselves and about how we are supposed to put ourselves in their home to understand them, but to not see them as lesser than us. And I really appreciate how we studied that and how we read about how we how we will best serve them without trying to change their lives and without trying to change their ways of living, assuming that our way of living is the best. And I think that even since we didn't get to go, I am grateful that we had the class together to learn and to build our community together beforehand. And so I am grateful for at least what I got to experience with people like Wilzave and other students, even though we didn't get to go. And I still use some aspects of what we learned in that class today in life when we talk about those who are in other places of the world and do not have as much as we have, but being able to say, "they are not less than us and they are not... they don't have less than we do, and 'that's a poor life.'" They have a life that makes them happy, and we should recognize that and see the world differently. So, I love the experience of the Ecuador: Empower immersion class before the trip.

Wilzave Quiles 3:15

Yeah, I share- I share with you the same thing like, I have carried what I learn in the class in my daily life. And I really see- it has really helped me to see things differently. You know, not kind of like victimize people, I guess, because you're... "they're so poor" and things like that. Like I don't see- we are equal, obviously, there are some injustices that needs to be addressed. But that doesn't mean, like you said, that there are that people that are in different situations are less than us, or we're better than them and things like that. Recognize who they are, you know, and I think that's something, like you said, like we learn through Empower: Ecuador. Hopefully we will carry this our whole lives and with whoever we encounter. So, how did the program connect with you in a personal way? So, before kind of were talking about what was Ecuador, so now like, how did it connect with you in a personal way?

Sarah Uhlig 4:27

I guess I was kind of nervous about going on the trip, just because I would be so far away from home, and I didn't know what I was going to experience. All I know is that it was going to be very impactful. And I guess I was really looking forward to being impacted by what I saw and the people that I met and the stories that I heard. And so I was just always kind of looking forward to that. Because I didn't get to experience that due COVID, I felt that I connected with this program in a personal way just because of how I was able to be vulnerable in my community conversations, and how I was able to, I guess, find myself putting myself in the texts that we read and trying to see how am I able to prepare myself for this. And so I felt that in a personal way, I was changed because of how I- how I better define what it means to be a missionary. And so I take that with me and so by redefining that and learning more about how it means to be a good missionary, I guess, that's impacted me in a personal way. But I do think if we would have gone on the trip, I think, that trip would have been a personal impact just because of the people we met, or a story that would have stuck out to me, that would have really carried on in my life.

Wilzave Quiles 5:45

Yeah, definitely, like, we needed to be vulnerable during this class. And so I think that was a special part of it and, like, even after COVID, that helped me to, to, I don't know, be very, very self-reflective of my actions, who I am as a person. And I don't know, like, I keep saying I don't know, but I do know. Like, recognize things that I need to change, you know, and reflect on those. I feel that before this class, I will do like, wrong things. So, I will have bad attitudes towards- towards others, for example, I don't know, either being indifferent or things like that, and- and after the class, it's kind of like recognizing these things are wrong, then how can I change them? So being more vulnerable with others and also change- change the wrong things that I think can be better. And I know that you already talk a little bit about the trip, but I would like to dig deeper into what it felt for you, whenever the trip was canceled. Like, did you feel that the whole purpose of the program ended, shifted or was not achieved because of the global pandemic and because we didn't get to travel?

Sarah Uhlig 7:18

I mean, by the time it was that last week before the trip, we were going to leave on a Saturday. And the trip was canceled on a Friday. But the days before, I was personally getting paranoid about the COVID-19 virus just because of things that I heard. I was really paranoid about it, and I was actually one of the students who was actually talking to Claire about what would happen if- if something were to happen when we were over there. And so by that point, there's a sense of panic in my heart. And so I was kind of torn, I really wanted to go on the trip at the same time. My fear was also rising, and so there's this conflict that I was having at the same time. So when the trip was canceled on Friday, it was a relief, but also just like, I didn't get to experience what we were preparing for, for months now. And it was really- it was really- it was hard to sit with; at the same time, I was just kind of like, I guess there's a relief that we- we didn't go. I didn't know how serious COVID-19 was gonna be, and especially for the people in Ecuador, who experienced things after COVID-19 hit and stuff like that. And so there's definitely that- that tornness is right there.

Wilzave Quiles 8:31

And then you felt after the trip was cancel, like, what was the purpose of the class? Like, do you feel it changed? Yeah...

Sarah Uhlig 8:44

I definitely- I still have the books, I never returned them. I have them in my iPad, and I have them here at the dorm. And I keep them here just because the text was so impactful that you can use it in so many other classes, but you can also use it in life. Especially when we're having these conversations about people who are, you know, maybe not from Ecuador, or people who are suffering or people who are in need, and how do you talk about them and treat them based on what you have learned and being respectful to others because they are equally human beings towards like, to you, you know, to us, we are all equally human beings. But not everyone lives the same life, but doesn't mean that one life is better than the other. And so I love the books that we read, and I felt like it shaped my my faith life and how I want to express that and how I want to continue moving forward with how I carry my conversations with other people but make sure that we recognize the dignity and respect for every human being will also understand there's a different culture everywhere you go. And so I- I really loved the class. I know we didn't get to go, but it was still very impactful.

Wilzave Quiles 9:58

Yeah, definitely. I felt I felt the same. That even though we didn't got to go, it was kind of like, the overall purpose of the class. I guess at the beginning, it was to go to Ecuador and prepare ourselves spiritually, mentally and everything. But I feel it also had like a sub-purpose, that it was just to prepare us in general for our lives and kind of think of like, our professional life, understanding that that will be a place of like, benefit, you know, not everybody gets to have education, but then with this education, what am I going to do to make sure that I'm serving others? And that I'm recognizing, like these issues of like injustice in the world, and, you know, making sure that I'm making an impact. So for me it- it did shifted into the main purpose, like went down because we didn't get to travel.

Sarah Uhlig 10:59

Yeah.

Wilzave Quiles 11:00

But definitely like, the life lesson became the main- the main purpose of the class.

Sarah Uhlig 11:08

Yes.

Wilzave Quiles 11:09

Yeah. And for me, it was- it was that like questioning, Why am I getting an education? And what impact am I going to bring with that education to the world, in different ways? So this one is the last question. How was the program adjusted to COVID-19? So, what different things were done in order to either get the purpose of the program across even though we didn't get to travel or... yeah, what happened after COVID during this program?

Sarah Uhlig 11:50

I definitely feel like the decision to have a class where we would meet intentionally twice a week was definitely really important. If we didn't know about COVID, then you know, we were all just

kind of over hearing about it, but we didn't know, we had a class anyway. Um, but not every program, not every missionary group has a class or has a group time where they meet. Sometimes people just sign up, and then they go. But Office of Community Engagement intentionally has this class, where you're able to grow in a community with one another, and you're able to learn together. So, even after we went on Zoom, eventually, like every other group, program organization in class, we had that stability that we already created back in January, because we had that community, and we had those connections, and we were already intentionally putting ourselves into a place where we were preparing for it. So even if we didn't get to go, we were already in a place where we were- we were pretty well set. So, everyone knew each other, we still kept the conversations going, we were able to talk about what it felt like to not like, what did you feel when you, like you said, when you weren't able to go? How did you feel? I mean, how are you processing this? We- and Claire allowed us to say that despite the fact we couldn't go, we're still gonna learn, we're still gonna try, and we're still gonna get through this together. And it ended up being a really impactful experience, despite not going on the trip. So, I thought that the office really found a great way for us in the long term for that semester to be successful, but to also have have a support system during COVID as well. It was a really hard time for everybody. And so to have another support system of a community that we that we built together to support all of us when we were all in that question of what's happening. It was a really great experience. And I- I really appreciated it.

Wilzave Quiles 13:50

I agree with you in that. I actually told Claire during our interview, something related to those lines about how this class actually helped me to be more like mentally stable during like COVID-19 because we had that foundation, that community in which we talk about things while it was starting, that were important, I guess, for my spiritual life, for my inner peace and all that. And then when everything happened, it was all a mess. But I felt that I was- I don't know, I wasn't really going crazy because I was in my house all alone or with my mom, you know. It was different because I had that. I don't know. Those stations in life and the conversations we had really helped me.

Sarah Uhlig 14:46

Yeah.

Wilzave Quiles 14:48

So yeah, COVID- COVID obviously is still a threat to our life and things like that. And it's still like an issue obviously. But right now, we have kind of like overcome some difficulties and come again as a community, see each other, you know, taking different precautions, but I'm happy for that step. Just yeah. I guess recognizing that it is- that it is still being bad, we need to be careful, but good things came from it.

Sarah Uhlig 15:30

Because I met you through that program and so that was that was really- that was a really great opportunity, too.

Wilzave Quiles 15:35

Yes, thank you, Sarah. Well, thank you. I'm gonna culminate the recording, but thank you so much for- for being here for this.

Sarah Uhlig 15:46

Thank you.

Wilzave Quiles 15:48

Stop recording. [recording stops]