

Reflection on a Medellín, Colombia

By: Paul Andrew Pifer

Lenoir City High School Class of 2023

As I look back over my life thus far, I realize how blessed I am. From a young age, my parents encouraged my siblings and me to experience opportunities that introduced and pushed us to interact with different cultures. These experiences were state side as well as abroad on several different continents. They were never luxury trips and stretched me personally. But through each experience, my wonder and love for people of different cultures grew without me even understanding what was happening. I learned that differences in culture did not have to lead to fear and close mindedness. But rather, could be a gateway to deep joy, new friends, and a greater understanding of myself. One specific experience emerges in my mind as a moment of deep personal growth more than others.

Last summer I was blessed with the opportunity to spend over two weeks participating on a sports ministry soccer team in the beautiful city of Medellín, Colombia South America. I had never been to South America before and was very excited to soak up new adventures and opportunities so different from my own. I cherished all fifteen days as I battled the Spanish language barrier with just a soccer ball. It was a constant challenge to be brave and put all my effort into learning about the Colombian culture and why soccer means so much to them.

One day our team took a late-night trip to a “neighborhood park” high up in the hills of Medellín. It was nearly midnight when we arrived at the park, yet there were over 150 children playing soccer. My teammates and I joined in. The kids were thrilled to see us, and we spent the next two hours playing soccer and making friends. Although, only a few of my teammates spoke fluent Spanish, I began to realize something: Soccer is not just a game. It is a language, an art, and a way of life. I began to bond with these children without saying one Spanish word. We were communicating with our laughter, our different soccer skills, and celebrations of play. This sport that I cherish deeply was breaking down barriers that would not have been possible to achieve through anything I could say.

In conclusion, my trip to Colombia, learning about its culture through the game of soccer, has become a reframing experience. I have discovered that every day holds moments for me to push my boundaries and learn about new cultures. Although challenging and often uncomfortable, stepping into the unknown can bring great rewards. Now, I lace up my cleats and play soccer with the international locals on the weekends. I am forever grateful for the opportunity to build these relationships. My desire is that my Medellín experience continues to motivate me daily to grow, learn, and love the different cultures and ventures I encounter. My life is richer as a result.