

My Time in the Sonoran Desert

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Fresh air smells like sunshine. It is crisp, refreshing, and seasoned with a combination of sand and animal. Tucson has a landscape that challenges the beauty of the world's great wonders. There are very few days in which the sun is not lighting up a clear sky. The picturesque mountains on either side of the city provide more than something "pretty" to look at, but it gives tourists an idea of the history and cultural

heritage that is still very much alive and vibrant in the area. In the winter, the mountain caps are swallowed with snow and for the rest of the year, if you want to escape the licking heat of the sun, then a simple hike up the mountain will expose you to several different terrains and you will eventually find yourself remembering what autumn looks like on the east coast.

I began my journey in late August and since arriving in Tucson, Arizona I feel like I have found the Angelica (Awhn-hell-ee-kah) that was hiding on the other side of the looking glass. There is a lot to say about searching for one's purpose or passions, but happiness is something that is felt and since being here I have a strong sense of it. This happiness has helped me develop a strong sense of who I am and how I identify as an individual in a currently divided country. This is a city of community] the natives of the land united with the visitors that have made it home, which when experienced, is really a beautiful thing.

There is something to do every weekend, from participating in some of the University of Arizona events, to social justice work like protesting to protect DACA, to celebrating the Dia de los Muertos events, dancing salsa/bachata, and attending poetry readings (and readings in general). Tapping into the social pulse of the area is easy. The people here are trying to include everyone and it's like coming home after several years of traveling^a although the people I see are strangers, they treat me as if we're lifelong friends and I am simply being welcomed home. I've enjoyed the opportunity to speak Spanish (my native tongue) frequently, as well as learning about the natives that live in the area. My ancestral

DNA tells me that I am 20% Native American and although I am aware it is most likely from central America since my family originates from that area, I have found great interest in many of the blessing rituals that the Natives use here, because it shares many similarities to the ones I have grown up knowing.

My work site is in South Tucson and my position is as an Afterschool Program Coordinator for about twelve or so children. My work with the children at Las Abuelitas sustainable living facility has filled me with great pride in the kids. The children I work with range from age five to twelve years old, and they are great. Yes, they have depression, anger management issues, and are sometimes deprived of basic necessities of life. I ache to serve them further because of those issues, but these kids are good. They are hardworking, sincere, and may be seen as a "future problem" by some, but they are very self-sacrificing and protective of each other, as well as their families. I have tasked myself with teaching them coping skills, helping them to be more mindful, and giving them hope that nothing stays the same and their future can be brighter. Illiteracy is a huge issue in the area, as well as children dropping out of schools in order to start working to help support their families. It is admirable, but a vicious cycle that is not actually helping them long-term. I know that after these ten months end I will be working towards obtaining my Masters in Social Work, so that I can work on policies that help children attain more rights and opportunities.

The working class are struggling to survive and it is affecting the children. They see drugs, hate, starvation, and the overall struggle that is to survive- not just in this area, but all over the United States and they need hope. They need to have the knowledge that there are other options and ways to maneuver through this portion of their lives. Their eyes are vacuums that are being filled with constant images of negativity and divisiveness. Their mouths are simply speakers repeating what their ears already recorded. The problem is that, at the ages of five to twelve, they have so much anger and spitefulness towards the people around them. Trust is minimal and it's not surprising, but it is terribly upsetting. This is all due to what they have already seen and heard. Living simply is difficult, because living is costly. I am lucky enough to have a car to drive around, but sometimes it feels like the gas prices are mocking me. I'm struggling and only really have to focus on feeding/caring for myself, while these families have one person working and ten people to provide for. This is very hard and almost impossible. If it was not for the nonprofits in the area and all of the resources provided by said organizations, most of these kids would be experiencing homelessness.

I have an itching desire to continue to build upon my skills and training to better serve not just this community, but other communities that are afflicted with the same issues. My time with Saguaro Christian Church has helped me grow relationships with the



congregation, as well as, given me a more whole sense of spirituality. The support that the church members give me has been essential in me learning about what God does to community when people have a passion to give and to serve others. This passion has driven me to pour more of myself into the kids and the program. It has allowed me opportunities to attend conferences on food banks and programs in the area. I attended a community leadership conference this past October in LA to learn about ways to improve Las Abuelitas' after-school program.

The sun rises each day, filling me with expectations and with the graciousness of having a new day to start again. The giant moon that fills the Arizona sky brings me peace and reflection on what I can change to improve not only myself, but the things that I can control. I now see more than with just the two anatomical spheres in my head, but with a heart that has taken the sand, the cactus, the dried rivers, and made it home. Although I am here temporarily, I find myself wanting to plant myself in the desert soil and grow arms with thorns. I know that when I leave, I will be leaving a part of my heart here and trying desperately to take pieces of Arizona life with me.

NBA XPLOR is a 10-month service residency opportunity for young adults ages 21-30, with the purpose of empowering young adults to discern and develop a "heart for care" as they live together in simple community, engage in direct service and justice work, engage in leadership development, and discern their vocational calls to honor the various communities they are called to serve. **Learn more and apply at nbacares.org/xplor.**