

Name: *Nadia H.*

School: *Hotchkiss High School*

The air turned from cool and crisp to humid as I stepped over the threshold of the plane and into the corridor that led to bustling lines of immigration, and the country that my family and I would call home for the next two months: Nicaragua.

All of the new sights, sounds, and smells overwhelmed my senses. I stood staring wide-eyed at all of the people in their colorful clothing and children running up and down the street laughing and screaming. As we walked I peeked into houses, each had their doors thrown open wide, allowing for a quick glimpse inside. Making their entire world appear transparent. In contrast, our hostel came into view around the corner, I noticed bars in the windows like a jail cell, hinting at the tumultuous culture of the country. There was a strong presence of health disorders and poverty which left a majority of the population on the streets to fend for themselves. I thought back to the children I saw before and wondered what potential their lives held compared to those of their peers who are born with the resources I have had in the US. Every child has so much to offer the world with their own unique strengths, but there are some that will never get the chance to share them if they can't get the care and support they need to live up to their full potential.

We settled into the hostel and the next morning began searching for breakfast. Tucked away on a back street, we came across a restaurant that employed people in the deaf community. We sat down at a table with a tablecloth depicting different signs for items on the menu, as well as the alphabet.



A fan hummed in the corner and everyone talked in hushed tones causing the silence to weigh heavily around me. When the waitress arrived I attempted to spell out my order, but she just stared at me blankly. Suddenly I realized that not only could she not hear me, but not speaking English, she also couldn't understand what I was trying to sign. My cheeks flushed and I turned to my mom, asking her to order first. The heat started to drain from my face as I sat staring at the table, contemplating how I'd made such an obvious mistake. By the time it came back around to me, I'd composed myself and was able to translate and sign my request of french toast and tea. She smiled at me encouragingly and I returned it with a shy smile of my own. Even though I'd made a mistake the first time, we had a better understanding of one another now. I had a small glimpse into her world of not being able to understand or be understood by someone else.

I am fascinated by the way we communicate with one another, and this experience validated how detrimental language barriers can be in communicating simple things such as a breakfast order. Something as fundamental as dialogue has the power to create stronger bonds, and the lack thereof is an impediment that has plagued our society since the beginning of civilization.

As I reflected on this experience, I realized just how greatly social interactions had affected my life and began to wonder how many other people had shared my experiences in school and in their everyday lives. Growing up I always felt like the sole introvert in a world full of extroverts. Around the time I started middle school, my friends stopped inviting me to hang out because I would sit off to the side unsure of how to participate. At school, I was getting headaches and feeling nauseous daily, simply because my body didn't know how to cope with all of the stimuli that are associated. It took me years to realize the strengths that being an introvert also brings, and once I did, I decided not to let my introversion hold me back from becoming a leader, or striving to help others.



Nelson Mandela once said, "If you talk to a man in a language he understands, that goes to his head. If you talk to him in his language, that goes to his heart." Not only do I want to help people to communicate and interact in society in order to enhance their quality of life, but I also want to learn how to best communicate with them so that I can see the world through their eyes. My experiences in Nicaragua and my challenges in school have inspired me to pursue a career in speech therapy. This type of profession will allow me to travel within the United States, and other countries, in order to help communities who otherwise may not receive this type of specialized care.