

Hello All!

I hope this letter finds you well, slowly on your way to fall with crisp air and leaves beginning to change. I miss it, so you all have to enjoy it twice as much for me. It is HOT and muggy here... which seems like a grave, unjust understatement. The air is so thick, even thicker than the jungle air in Ecuador, and I seem to live in a perpetual state of stickiness. It is worth it, though. The skies are so blue with stark white clouds that always shift and change. Sometimes, when the sun is just right, the edge of the clouds glow golden yellow against a dark blue sky and it is breath taking. The past few nights the moon has been either full or close to it and its reflection in the ocean is this bright rippling "v" shape that gets wider closer to shore. During the day the water on the beaches starts off a beautiful emerald green color, then about 200 yards in it become a blue-ish turquoise, then another 100 yards out it is a rich, clear blue. I have never seen such beautiful beaches... but I digress.

Let's take this from the beginning- I got moved in fine. The drive was not fun. 95 is painfully long and flat and straight and maddening, but I made it. I didn't even get rained on. When I was driving through South Carolina Ernesto was off of its coast, I was well south by the time he hit land. When I got down here I got a small taste of Miami in hurricane mode, though, since everything was all boarded up. I already know how to take hurricane shutters down. ;)

A week ago yesterday I moved into my house, which is huge and way nicer than expected. The volunteers down here live in parsonages owned by various Methodist churches. Silver Palms United Methodist Church owns the property that I live on, which includes a big beautiful fenced in yard, mango and avocado trees, and a rambling four bedroom, three full bath ranch house that far exceeds all of our expectations. My roommates and I each have our own rooms, which is nice. The only hold-up was that the air conditioner was broken. I thought "No biggy, I've done two summers in Virginia without AC, I'll be fine for a week here." Spoken like a true tourist. What I didn't know then was there is nothing in Virginia that can compare to a week in Miami without AC. Thank goodness it is finally fixed! The people that I live with (Jordan, Tony, and Erin) are amazing. I really couldn't ask for better roomies. We laugh all the time, and sometimes we get a long a little too well, which leads to late night talks and sleep deprivation. We don't appear to have any problem living within our very strict budget, at least we have done well so far, but they have made me in charge of groceries and grocery money just in case. Who knew that frugally grocery shopping was a gift?

This past week has been a lot of meeting new people and orientations, a lot of getting to know the neighborhood and getting lost. We live in Homestead, which is about 30 minutes south of South Beach (not counting INSANE FL traffic!). When you turn onto our road there is a sign that reads "now entering farm area." We are in the middle of nowhere. We got lost on the way to Wal-Mart one night and almost ended up in Key Largo. The other volunteers, five girls, live in a house in Little Havana, which is a really cool neighborhood. There is a law that says that any property bought or sold in our neighborhood must be no smaller than 5 acres, so we are surrounded by tropical plant and fruit farms. These are the farms where a lot of the Hispanic population work seasonally. And when I say "work," I mean work hard. When I go running or walking everyone is extremely nice, but they also look at me like "What is she thinking?" Their jobs are so physically taxing that they can't imagine voluntary self-inflicted exercise in the hot sun and stifling humidity.

These are probably some of the farm workers that I will be working with. My organization works with USDA funded farm worker housing, which means that the families that live in the USDA “camp” make no more than a certain amount of money and that their primary source of income is from farming. I visited one of the three camps that my agency ministers to yesterday. This particular camp has 300 tiny cinder-block houses, usually with three small bedrooms, one bathroom, a tiny kitchen and a tiny den. I can’t emphasize how small these dwelling are. Most of them are occupied by families of five or more, which is almost directly due to ignorance about family planning, or the typical strict Catholic belief that generally comes with being Latino. I haven’t spent much time in the camp yet, but I am told that the issues I will be facing include (but are certainly not limited to) lots of substance abuse, domestic violence, gangs, and a huge schism between the sexes.

I can’t explain to you how different everything here is! It truly doesn’t feel like America most of the time. You can be in a store and hear five different languages, none of them English. Bright yellow arches are more rare than in the suburbs I am used to, and less frequented since they are surrounded by tiendas and restaurants that sell arepas, tamales, and salchichas. I have had Cuban and Mexican breakfast pastries, which were both delicious. And coffee is key. Starbucks who? No, in Miami it is café con leche- envision a 32oz Styrofoam cup half full of heavy cream, then add about ½ cup sugar and fill the cup the rest of the way with the strongest, freshest South American coffee you can find. Or café Cubano, which comes in a miniature cup accompanied by shot glasses (for lack of a better term, they are really about ½ the size of a shot glass). Why take tiny shots of coffee, you ask? Just try it, you’ll see. Café Cubano is stronger than any espresso I have ever had, and packed with sugar. True Cubans don’t drink water for at least an hour after taking a shot- why dilute the coffee? Why wash away the taste? (Which WILL stay with you for that full hour). But don’t be fooled, Latin culture isn’t necessarily dominant here. There are Haitians that speak unintelligible Creole and people from everywhere, which means you never really know what culture you are dealing with. Miami is unlike any place I have ever been or ever lived and the only way I can think of to help y’all understand is to just keep writing about it.

This letter is getting super long, so I will wrap it up with a few lessons I have learned thus far. 1) The bus system is everything except reliable, logical, or practical. 2) South Beach is clothing optional. Really, there are no rules on South Beach at all. What happens in South Beach, stays in South Beach. 3) What you see on TV is not fake. The sun is that bright, the people are that beautiful, the water is that clear and everything does move at that pace.

Thank you so much for all of your support in this! I can’t begin to tell you what a blessing all of you are to me! Your prayers and support are invaluable! Take care of yourselves and you will hear from me again soon. If you would like to write, I would love to hear from you. My new address is 15855 SW 248th St Homestead FL, 33031. (Don’t let the street number fool you, they say this place is laid out like a grid and I think they are lying, they just want us to think there is some rhyme and reason behind the madness that is numbering streets as high as 400 and weaving them through each other in random order.)

Love and peace,
Allison