

Learning to live

a reflection



By Rachel Blood

It was ten in the morning, and I had tears in my eyes.

Across a white table, backlit by the sun streaming through the patterned windows of En-Señas, Yoli cried as she recounted the struggles of watching her husband refuse to communicate with her daughter, of her daughter returning from school in tears, of the discrimination against both indigenous and deaf people in Guatemala.

She spoke Spanish, her hands moving in time with her lips as she signed, and I didn't know what she was saying at the time — just that she was hurting. It was hard to watch. Hannah's eyes watered as she lowered her camera. Talia and Marís watched and listened intently on my left, offering Yoli silent support as she laid her heart bare to journalists she'd met only hours ago.

Yoli needed her story to be heard.

I felt like I had been emptied out and filled up again.

I realized communication is more than words. My life has been dictated by words. Captured by them. Guided by them. I study

them, read them, write them, hear them. I've devoted a future career to them. The reason I met Yoli was to tell a story. With ... words. We had photographers and designers and editors, but words were my wheelhouse, the tools with which I was supposed to be able to spin and manipulate stories into the perfect form, the most moving sentences and paragraphs and pages. Words are powerful. But there at the table with Yoli, nine people in a tiny room, I had no idea what was being said.

And it didn't matter.

I still understood everything she needed me to understand.

It was the tears in her eyes and the crack in her voice, the way it would lilt upwards as she exchanged glances with her daughter, a cry built on years of frustration and misunderstanding and desperation, the way even her sharp hand motions seemed to be pleading with the world, with God, to help her.

I don't speak Spanish. I don't understand sign language, much less Guatemalan sign language. But the beautiful thing about the human connection is that we will always find a way to say what must be said, words or no words, signs or no signs. We somehow find a way to understand each other on the most fundamental level of emotion and react accordingly, to empathize with a person whose circumstances we can hardly imagine.

The idea of spending three weeks in a country I knew nothing about scared me. I had never been outside of the United States.

The extent of my Spanish was a 200-level college class and the only word I really remembered was *lechuga*. But Textura Guatemala pushed me to my limits and then over them, and I grew more than I thought possible in less than a month.

My team taught me to trust and find joy in communication. Our Guatemalan partners taught me how to dance, how to live life vibrantly and also where to find really good chicken. My sources taught me the best stories take time to tell. COVID-19 taught me things don't always go as planned, and sometimes that's OK. Guatemala taught me to see beauty in places I'd never have thought to look.

Yoli's tears were a window into the hardships of the deaf and indigenous communities of Guatemala, but they were also a mirror in which I could evaluate my own changing beliefs. Gabriela was silent next to her mother. Thirteen years old and living in a world of silence, wide brown eyes and hands hidden beneath the table, she watched her mother's hands, her lips, listening the only way she could.

She reached up and wiped a tear from her mother's cheek.

I smiled at them, eyes watery. There was nothing I could think to say except *thank you*. But it was ten in the morning, and I had tears in my eyes. And Yoli understood. It was enough.

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Bucu (right) and her daughter Gabriela laugh as they communicate in sign language about their fond memories made at En-Señas. | Photo by Hannah Hobus