

Week 2 at Manos Abiertas

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My internship in Guatemala consists of shadowing and assisting health professionals and midwives: care for women, by women. Asociación Manos Abiertas, or “Open Hands Association” is a women’s clinic in Ciudad Vieja, Guatemala offering contraceptive, prenatal, childbirth, and related women’s health services. On Tuesdays, I travel with Hannah Friewald to Ixchel Parto Natural (Ixchel Natural Birth Center) in Guatemala City. There, Hannah sees clients in varying stages of pregnancy for checkups. Ixchel also offers classes on topics such as health during

pregnancy, expectations for labor, delivery, and postpartum, and the role of a midwife in the process.

The staff with whom I work maintain a feminist attitude and aim to provide women with autonomy in the potential decision to become pregnant. Manos Abiertas offers services at a low cost and is supported, in part, by private donations. The model of childbirth support offered by Manos Abiertas and Ixchel highly values the health and autonomy of the mother in labor. In general, midwives and doulas emphasize the importance of the natural capabilities of women to deliver their babies, and consider interventions such as induction, epidural, and cesarean section as generally unnecessary for healthy, low-risk pregnancies.

I am on call 24/7 to attend the births of either Manos Abiertas or Ixchel clients. To date, I have attended 3 births. The births may take place at Ixchel, Manos Abiertas, or in the home of the client. Hannah and the staff at Manos Abiertas are highly experienced and trained in the profession of midwifery.

Previous Tulane women have participated in this internship, so I heard about its existence through the network at school. According to the staff, all of those interns were professional and kind, and I was welcomed as soon as I introduced myself as a Tulane student.

My first week required some adjustment time, as I had effectively moved to a foreign country where I do not speak the language. The staff is exceedingly welcoming and patient. I am aiming to improve my language skills, learn about best childbirth practices, develop a sense of when medical interventions are appropriate. I also want to understand how culture and location inform effective treatment. I anticipate these learning goals to be met. Additionally, I have learned a great deal about the processes of pregnancy, labor, childbirth, and lactation, as well as health-promoting and harm-reduction practices that accompany them.