

Dear Class of 1978,

After five great weeks in Venezuela, I have returned home to Iowa. I am writing to thank you once more for your support.

This January, I set out to start a three-week EMT course in Caracas, Venezuela with my brother Ethan from Macalester College, and our partner Terence Steinberg, under the project name “A Tu Lado”. In the following months, we formed a collaboration between Macalester First Aid, Venemergencia, and the student firefighters of the Universidad Simón Bolívar (USB). Together we designed a course to model a standardized curriculum for the region, with the goal of creating positive change on three levels: with the individual, through personal and professional empowerment; in the community, through more effective emergency response; and internationally, by opening a dialogue between our countries.

A major obstacle for our project was figuring out how our course would fit into the context of emergency medical education in Venezuela. In early May, while talking with Venemergencia’s directors and the student firefighters, we realized this summer’s time frame and the availability of students didn’t synchronize. Many prospective students work full time, and we couldn’t fit all the information we wanted in a three-week course.



Recognizing this, we divided the curriculum into a preparatory course and a longer course that will be taught at USB later this year. We also embarked on a new venture, which will be described further below.

All project partners agreed that a preparatory course was a necessary step toward a standardized EMT course. What we consider basic elements of emergency medical education in the United States are often absent in Venezuelan training, and this needs to be rectified before moving forward. Conversely, what we consider advanced techniques, such as sutures and IVs, are some of the first skills taught to Venezuelan paramedics. A Tu Lado’s goal, this summer and in the future, is to balance these skill sets. Our preparatory course addressed these inconsistencies, focusing on the ABC’s of medical assessment, the chain of survival, quality CPR, patient extrication, and transport. Three evenings a week, doctors and experienced paramedics taught conceptual classes, and on Saturdays students honed their skills at simulations coordinated by the firefighters at USB. I was even able to lead a few of these classes. In total, the students received over 40 hours of instruction.

Unfortunately, we didn’t have as many students as we’d hoped. Of the nineteen students that attended the course, only ten were consistently there. Completion depended on both attendance and final exam results, and only eight participants

met both criteria. I believe this was due to a lack of clear incentives for the participants. In course evaluations, students praised the quality of instruction, but questions were raised about the purpose of a “preparatory” course. Because the course was only part of a full EMT curriculum, it was referred to as a “pre-diploma,” and it became apparent that this name did not convey the legitimacy that the students desired. In the future, we will reframe the course as a Basic Life Support (BLS) program. It will still serve as a preparatory course for the second part of the EMT program, similar to how BLS courses are prerequisites for EMT programs in the United States, but it will also be its own entity. Additionally, we have built a network of healthcare professionals from public and private institutions – beyond Venemergencia and USB – that will provide more opportunities for promoting upcoming programs.



Since we cut down the paramedic course, we were able to begin a new endeavor, and it quickly became the most exciting part of our trip. For many years, our partners at Venemergencia envisioned a project to extend emergency medical services into the impoverished communities of Caracas named ‘barrios.’ A Tu Lado, and the alliance we forged with the student firefighters at USB, provided an opportunity to start this project. The perfect

place to begin was in the barrio Los Erasos, a 5000-person slum built into the hillside behind Venemergencia’s office, where poverty, steep terrain, and lack of security impede healthcare access. Because local medical clinics are absent in Los Erasos, our goal was to create volunteer emergency medical brigade that would connect these isolated communities with inner-city hospitals. Without adequate space to host the course within Los Erasos, we partnered with professors at IESA, a nearby business school, to hold the course in their lecture halls. We scheduled class time outside of regular working hours, and required participants to pay only a modest tuition fee (30 bolivares, or about 7 dollars) to represent their commitment to the program. Over 30 hours of instruction, we taught students to access, stabilize, and transport patients using techniques suitable for their environment.

We expected around 15 students to attend this unique course. We were astounded to have more than 60 students participating in the course, and more than 55 graduated. What’s more, the students showed a great interest in continued education and the formation of the brigade. Whether they were teenagers or grandparents, students approached the class with inspiring attentiveness and purpose. We expect this to continue as graduates rehearse with equipment, finalize protocols and launch an active service.

From the beginning, community leaders in Los Erasos took a prominent role in promoting this course and designing the brigade’s logistics. Through regular meetings with the community members we have developed a system where if

someone needs immediate care, anyone with a mobile phone can alert the brigade by texting a location and emergency type to an SMS group of brigade members. The first four members to reply become the response team and are in charge of stabilizing the patient and transporting them to the nearest access point, where an ambulance will meet them. Through weekly videoconferences, we are continuing to work with Venemergencia and community leaders to assist with the brigade's development and to document the process.

The courses we taught this summer are not quite the same courses we set out to teach last spring; however, I see the same, if not more exciting possibilities alive in the current project. The paramedics who attended the BLS course have a more complete understanding of physiology, CPR, and other basic protocols, and the students from Los Erasos, who had no background in emergency medicine, are still beaming with pride at what they have learned. For the paramedic community, our courses mark a humble, but unmistakable beginning to standardizing emergency medical education. And in Los Erasos, the new brigade provides a source of unity and trust centered around a vital service. In both communities, our work opened an international dialogue on emergency medicine, and brought our nations closer together.

Still, the work is far from done. We have seen incredible opportunities for emergency medical education in Caracas and made tangible progress through our efforts. Not only do I intend to continue the work in Venezuela, but I am inspired with the prospects of leading similar initiatives in other countries.

The memories I have enjoyed this summer are some of most meaningful of my life. I have grown as a student, communicator, and as a citizen of the world. It has given me an unbelievable array of experiences, from working on ambulances and teaching CPR, to watching my patient die from gunshot wounds and helping deliver new life in the emergency room. My six weeks in Venezuela were perhaps some of the fastest in my life, and certainly some of the best.



This project would not have been possible without the resources of the Class of 1978. Our courses were received with great joy, and grateful comments, which I now send to you. Thank you for your time, your guidance, and your support.

Sincerely,

Seth Forsgren

For more about the project, please see our website and blog: www.atulado.net