

When you receive, you give, and vice versa.



After many years of living overseas, I found myself traveling to Venezuela for work. While packing, wonderful memories came to my mind, about its landscapes, its weather, its people. The idea of being an expat in my home country made me feel scared and excited at the same time, a bittersweet feeling.

In Venezuela, every half hour someone is murdered. Caracas, the capital, where I was born, ranks third on the list of the most dangerous cities in the world. Within MSF operations, it is known as a “violent context,” and it is what I expected to find. I have to confess that sometimes I felt fear. However, I also found gratitude and kindness.

One day, I was getting off the jeep wearing my white vest. A lady passing by asked, “Can you help me?” She explained that her son had a fever and that they ran out of medicine and she has no resources to buy more.

MSF work in Carapita, a community located in the west of Caracas where people learn to coexist with death. While our work focused on mental health care, no one on the team saw it as an option, to not assist that mother and her son. Half an hour later, I was on my way to take them to the nearest health center.

In the hospital waiting room, the boy asked me, “What's your name?”

“Paola,” I said, “and you?”

“My name is Ricardo, and I am five years old.”

“What a coincidence!” I told him, “I have a brother named Ricardo.”

He smiled. Then he showed me his shoes with great pride; apparently, he can only wear them on special occasions.

After talking a bit with them, I realized that Ricardo and his mom had not eaten for some time, so I went to the only store in the area and got some cookies and something for them to drink. After eating half the cookies and drinking half the bottle, Ricardo carefully saved the rest.

I said, “Are you not hungry anymore, Ricardo?”

“Yes, I am.”

“And why don't you finish them?”

He told me, “I want to save half of it for my little sister. Her name is Ana, and she is two years old.”

I ran back to the store and bought all the cookies that were left.

It turned out Ricardo had a throat infection. After making sure he would receive the proper treatment, I said goodbye. Ricardo and his mother thanked me once more.

Back in the office, I silently thanked Ricardo, a five-year-old boy who reminded me that when you receive, you give, and vice versa. He received the opportunity to get better and some cookies. Without knowing it, he gave me the certainty that I was doing the right thing. Being in my home country as an expat was no longer a bittersweet feeling, it was just sweet.

*Paola Mazzei (Barcelona, Spain) is originally from Venezuela. She joined Médecins Sans Frontières Spain in 2010, where she serves as Coordinator of the Associative Team and Assistant to the Board of Directors.*