

## A Portrait of Cotito Farm Family

By Charlotte Blum



At home in the US, my family and most people I know buy their food from the grocery store. Buying local or even just organic food is more expensive and inaccessible to many people. By getting groceries from a store, we become unaware of our food source and the journey a crop or animal product takes to get to our plate. We are able to distance ourselves not only from the location where our food was grown or raised, but from the people who grow or raise it as well. For this reason, I decided to get to know the farmers who provided us with eggs, milk, cheese, and coffee during our stay in Cotito. By shadowing Raquel, Nicolas, and Antonio, I hoped to connect people who cultivate the food with the people eating it, and gain insight into an incredibly important job that we are often able to overlook.

Raquel, Nicolas, and Antonio's days start early. They wake up to milk the cows and goats. Most of this milk goes to their family and the people who work on the land, but the leftovers are used to make cheese for the hotel. Other chores for the day include collecting and washing the eggs, making cheese, and preparing coffee



beans to sell. Along with tasks that need to be done daily, there are so many other things that need to happen less frequently. During my time here I've watched them slaughter chickens, cut the horse's mane, and plant new coffee bushes, all of which;h don't happen everyday. Beyond her jobs on the farm,

Raquel manages some of the finances for Los Quetzales, cooks the meals for her family, and home schools Antonio – who lives too far from any school to attend. Even though the days are filled with work, Nicolas and Raquel like their lives here, saying they would have already left if they didn't.

Antonio's life differs greatly from that of most 12 year olds. His days are filled with work on the farm, and time spent with adults. Due to Cotito's isolation from main towns or other people,

Antonio rarely interacts with other adolescents. Despite how daunting that idea might seem, Antonio does not usually mind. When I asked whether he saw his friends often, he answered by saying that he



doesn't really have friends anymore, but also added that he doesn't need them since he has so many cousins. Proximity to family was a big sacrifice that Antonio, as well as Raquel and Nicolas, had to make when moving to Cotito. Antonio talked to me

about the move, saying that the transition to life here was incredibly tough. He missed his family and friends, and the change in climate significantly affected his asthma for the worse. Antonio told me that he got to see some of his cousins four months ago, which is very recent for him. He also spoke about the aunt he hasn't seen in five years, since his family came to Cotito, and about his current separation from his older siblings, one of whom lives in Panama City, while the other lives in Darien. Despite the hardship of being far from family, he says he is very content now. He enjoys the freedom homeschooling gives him and that life here is calmer. When we talked about what he wants to do in the future, he said that he might want to keep doing the work he does now in Cotito.

The life Antonio leads is a drastic shift from the life of many 12 year olds, both in Panama, but especially in the US. From the typically American lens, where nothing should come before education, the way Antonio has grown up could be seen in a negative light. Though there are moments when Antonio alludes to feeling a bit of loneliness, he is not unhappy with his life. He is a "regular" 12 year old boy, who loves to watch Comedy Central and whose favorite food is pizza. He works alongside his parents, and seems to have a very close relationship with them. Most importantly, he gets to do work everyday that he enjoys doing, and that he believes will be important to his future.

While my project originally began as a look into Raquel and Nicolas' lives, it slowly became more focused on Antonio's experience growing up here for the past five years. It strayed from my original intentions, but I believe it has a more significant impact. I do still hope that after seeing my presentation students



watching have an understanding of all the work Raquel and Nicolas devote to the farm. However, I am now more focused on devaluing the standards for a happy childhood that I, and many students, came here with. Antonio still has time to play sports and watch TV, but I assumed that since he rarely sees his friends and so much of his day is taken up by chores, he would not be as happy as he is. Once I gave Antonio

the space to talk about his life, I learned that he doesn't need to be constantly surrounded by friends, and that he is content here not despite working hard, but because of working hard.

I am so thankful Antonio spent so much time with me during this project, and that he was so open to answering my questions and speaking about his experiences.