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Of Course, I Live in a Tree House

Monica Hardin

It turns out that I was a bit of jerk as a teenager. But I have solid reasons for it. My fear, though, is that my personal amusements may have led to people living into adulthood believing what I told them. I grew up as a missionary kid in Colombia, and the reality of that life was distinctly different from what people, particularly people of my age cohort, back in U.S. churches perceived. In a time when Colombia was known internationally by depictions in movies like “Romancing the Stone” and coffee commercials starting the fictional Juan Valdez, not to mention the illicit drug trade, people made assumptions. In most situations, I would work to kindly dispel them of their incorrect notions, but other times, I was less patient.

The baseline for my reality as a missionary kid in Colombia is that my life was very similar to the lives of teenagers in the cities in the U.S. We lived in large cities (because that’s where the people are), and I attended a private school that taught AP classes and had sports teams and fine arts programs. We went to church, got together with friends, ate out at restaurants, watched movies, and had pretty regular day-to-day lives.

As a young person, I was bothered by the assumptions that American kids had about my life. I once received a letter from a young girl working on a *Girls in Action* badge in which she asked me if I knew what stickers were. It’s possible that was when my snobbery emerged.

When we were back in the U.S. on furloughs, we would regularly speak at churches, and I was charged with talking to the youth about what it was like to be a missionary kid. Most of the time, it was benign. People were vaguely interested, might ask a couple of questions (e.g. what do you do for fun?), then quickly lose interest, and we’d go outside to play volleyball or something. But there was one place where no

matter how I tried to explain it, the youth simply wouldn't believe that we lived in a big city, etc. I was trying to be patient, but when one kid said, "I just don't know how you survive without tv," that was my last straw. And I spun a tale.

The tale involved my life living in a tree house. Daily, my sister and I would get up in the morning and climb down (no elevators in tree houses) to begin our daily ablutions. We would then step into our sturdy banana leaf canoe to paddle down the piranha-infested waters of the Amazon River to meet up with Juan Valdez for our daily coffee picking. The listeners nodded knowingly as this story fit their assumptions.

As I have aged, I have come to regret that sassiness and snark. My experience overseas gave me a unique perspective on the world, and, as an adult, I have fine-tuned my messaging in an attempt to help people see beyond stereotypes and assumptions. There are probably adults in Texas and Arkansas who still think I actually knew Juan Valdez and that coffee grows in the rainforests of Colombia. But I hope that the first part of my conversation with them maybe supplanted the vivid tale, and they realize that while there are differences among countries and cultures, there is actually a lot more that we have in common when it comes right down to it. And that is likely the most significant understanding that I carry with me from my time out of the U.S.

About the Author

Dr. Monica Hardin is the Associate Vice President for Graduate and Online Education at Ouachita Baptist University. She also is a faculty member in the Department of History of the Sutton School of Social Sciences.