

Sarah Adler
Panama

The small village of Kenangwen lies tucked into the islands of Panama. Surrounded by teal waters, luscious green forests, and engulfed in sunshine, it is far from a tourist's eyes. It is centered around the gathering place and schoolhouse, two small but sturdy buildings that stand proudly for their inhabitants of the village, the Ngobe Tribe. The rest of the village unfurls around the gathering place and schoolhouse; consisting of huts and cottage-sized buildings that have a beautiful homespun-architectural look. The people of Kenangwen, people of creamy coffee-colored skin, shiny dark straight hair and rich brown almond shaped eyes, are even more beautiful than their land. I stand out completely when I join them, with my fair skin, chocolate wavy hair, round green eyes, and bright purple and pink clothes, but they greet me warmly and curiously.

Olivia and I start to work on painting a welcome sign for Kenangwen, striking up a conversation with two of the men mixing cement. They listen patiently as we try our Spanish, and aren't angered when we say for the seventeenth time, "Repítalo por favor". They laugh at the misshaped B I painted, and both Olivia's and my constant struggle to paint small triangles. Along with laughing, they smile a lot. I feel at ease talking to these strangers. Later, two women from the village join us, one woman, with gray hair and a look of wisdom, even asks me questions. Although she holds years of wisdom beyond me, she treats me as an equal. I feel at home, miles away from home.

As I head back onto the boat, someone says, "You may never have the opportunity to do something like this again". And I thought, will I never return to Kenangwen? Will I never see the two men who mixed cement or the wise women who greeted me as if I were nothing different from them? I am only fourteen, and I have years and years ahead of me, and I couldn't imagine not ever coming back. Would they remember me? Or would I just be another volunteer who stepped upon their island, joining in on their life for the day? I decided then and there I could not let that happen.

I believe one day I will return to the Kenangwen. Whether I will actually step foot on the land, I do not know. I do not know if I will ever see the two men who mixed cement, or the wise women, or if even my welcome sign will remain. But what I do know, what I believe, is that in the future, I will visit Kenangwen. When I decide to welcome others, I will be visiting Kenangwen. When I decide to ignore differences, it will be as if I am stepping off that boat and onto the island again. I believe Kenangwen will stay with me the rest of my life. I will visit it mentally millions of times. I do not know if my sign will hang up there forever, but what I do know is that the paint still stains my purple shirt.