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As a social work student, I have been fortunate to discover my two dedicated passions, in both my professional and personal life—international social work and women’s global and health-related issues. To supplement personal experiences, existing knowledge, and desired awareness about these topics, three books were chosen in the hopes of bridging the two subject matters.... *When I Was Elena*, by Ellen Urbani Hildebrand (2006), intertwines the author’s experience as a Peace Corps volunteer working on youth development in Guatemala with stories and viewpoints of indigenous women who struggle through the depths of poverty, abuse, and family issues.

Hildebrand describes in detailed, uninhibited journalist two adventurous and challenging years in which she served as a young volunteer in the U.S. Peace Corps. While living in the rural mountainous regions of Guatemala, Hildebrand discovers her true self by building relationships with women who are among the poorest in the world, though rich in culture and spirit. Hildebrand writes with heartfelt sincerity and heartbreaking honesty, alternating chapters about her experiences in cultural immersion with incredibly wise viewpoints of seven Guatemalan women. She puts an intense focus on the realities of international service, and her writings incorporate the intricate dealings of intercultural communication, varying modes of thinking between cultures, and occasional misunderstandings. The content is to be taken seriously, but Hildebrand adds a personal spin to keep the reader laughing out loud.

Written along the lines of an adventure or travel novel, Hildebrand unashamedly relates her experiences, as she perceives them, complete with thought process and dialogue. To balance her subjectively immersed encounters, the author weaves in the stories of female Guatemalans to show other viewpoints of the same events. Brutal honesty, a lack of clouded idealism, make this book stand out from other literature about international service. This work is not for the timid.

Hildebrand’s personal stories about being the near-victim of an attempted rape and the victim of a successful robbery touch on issues common to Central American countries, the consequences of substance abuse, police corruption, and the unfathomable effects of civil and guerrilla warfare. Hildebrand builds relationships with the many women around her and thus discovers tangled webs of incest, child abuse, young marriage, and mental illness. Her many bouts with sickness and injuries land her in Guatemalan hospitals and in direct contact with the limited resources and troublesome structure of the healthcare system of a developing country. Having served as a teacher in some of the outermost rural areas of Guatemala, Hildebrand experienced first-hand the lack of resources for students who are not among the elite families of the country. She deals with cultural stereotypes, overt racism, and naivety, eventually succeeding in building relationships and educating others about cultural diversity.

When I Was Elena is a must-read for those with a heart for international issues, anti-poverty efforts, and the struggles of women and children in the developing world.

Anyone who has a desire to live, work, or volunteer in developing countries would be swayed one way or the other after reading about Hildebrand's experiences.

The methods Hildebrand uses to form relationships and immerse herself in Guatemalan culture are truly inspiring. The book also sheds light onto the viewpoints and beliefs of indigenous Mayan cultures concerning family, child-rearing, education, and religion.