On July 25, 2017, Headmaster Mark Tahjian— with his wife Erin, their four children and two dogs—boarded an airplane in Newark and landed in San Jose, Costa Rica. They traveled into the mountains to the town of Monteverde. Surrounded by cloud forest, they have spent the last five months learning about life in one small corner of Central America. Here are some reflections from Headmaster Tahjian about the family’s experiences. When Erin and I started talking about the Board’s generous offer of a sabbatical, we came up with three concepts: we wanted to go someplace in the Spanish-speaking world; we hoped to immerse ourselves in a community significantly different from the familiar; and we wanted to be close to nature. In the remarkable country of Costa Rica we found all three. Here are excerpts from a journal I kept throughout this adventure.

August 1 – The first day of school

We dropped off everyone this morning. Erin is staying to keep an eye on Al and help him with potty training, and Rob and Phoebe and I feel this mixed emotion: I really want today to go well for all of them, and I am reminded of how hard it can be to be new, especially in such a different environment. Being an invertebrate optimist, I feel this unfamiliar emotion called worry. I am worried that they are going to have a hard time and I want them to know that it will get better. I am worried that it will feel too challenging, and I am hoping, hoping, hoping that they come home enthralled rather than overwhelmed. I am hoping, hoping, hoping that Al does well. He was so excited to get on the bus, but he looks so small walking into such a big world. It is a growth opportunity for everyone— I know that in my heart— so here goes: today at 8 AM, the adventure officially began.

August 10 – Playing in the street

As I write this, Ella and Robin are kicking a soccer ball in the street with Carlos, our Costa Rican neighbor. Carlos is nine and a really sweet kid. I am struck that for the first time in their lives, Ella and Robin are playing in a neighborhood, doing the street thing. It is wonderful.

The street is a dirt road, very rocky, right off the main street that runs from Monteverde to Santa Elena. It has big open drains and drop-offs, and they are having a blast. The occasional car or motorcycle comes by and they stand aside, just as I used to do when playing on the street in Philadelphia. Every so often, the ball rolls into an open gravelly pit, and someone has to climb in and get it. Good... but of course part of the experience. In fact, they are having so much fun climbing in and out of the gullies that they are fighting over who gets to retrieve the ball.

It is 6:25 PM and very dark so it feels that much more magical— playing under the streetlights.

September 1 – A good attitude

There is a dog that lives down the hill from the kids’ school. It looks like every other street dog around here: not too big, not too small, tan fur. Most of these dogs look like our dog Chase, as that seems to be the ideal size to find food, dodge cars, and reproduce with other similar sized dogs.

So anyway, the dog is talking about looks like every other dog around here except for one thing: he is missing an eye. That fact seems to have about zero impact on his ability to wag his tail, snuff, get around, and otherwise enjoy life as a dog in Costa Rica.

Sometimes we people spend too much time thinking about the things we don’t have, rather than enjoying the things we have. This little dog has a good attitude.

October 5 – What ever happened to that kid?

This weekend, we are going to Nicaragua as a way of renewing our 90 day visa in Costa Rica. Crossing the border was exciting, to say the least, as it was packed with people changing money, offering rides, and generally trying to grab a buck wherever they could. That night, we went out to dinner, and as we sat in an open cafe, we were approached again and again by people hawking various items as well as kids motioning to their mouths looking for food. Nicaragua’s economic situation is vastly different from Costa Rica’s.

That afternoon, Ella, Robin, Phoebe and I found an asphalt space to play soccer. We were kicking the ball around when a couple of Nicaraguan kids joined us. One of them was named Juan Gonzales, and he was incredibly skilled. He glided around, dribbled well, made clean passes. He was also a really nice kid. I wish I had asked him how big he was, but not very big, but in this country, that doesn’t mean much. His clothes were pretty dirty, and he did not look very well cared for.

So here is a kid who has an unusual talent and seems not to have many other resources. How will his talent be developed? Who will help him? Does he go to a school where soccer can be his lifestyle? In the United States, at BBA, he would be heading towards college and maybe even a soccer scholarship. What happens when you are growing up in a country where the GDP per person is only $2,000?

I want to come back in ten years and ask, “What ever happened to that kid?” I am afraid of what the answer would be.

November 6 – Learning Spanish

Erin and I have been taking Spanish classes for four hours each day this week. It is just the two of us with a teacher... sort of like intensive marital counseling in a language that you don’t speak very well (.). It is exciting to get better and better, to understand more, to be able to carry on conversations. Then there is the frustrating part. For example, today we went over 14 instances where you are supposed to use the imperfect tense instead of the preterite tense when speaking about the past. I thought my head was going to explode! The fact is, it is really, really hard for me to learn a new language, especially at 58 years old. My brain has pretty much calcified, and I keep hearing myself give advice to BBA students: “Grit! Work hard! Find the beauty in each subject!” All that good advice is making my head hurt.

Costa Rica is not just “someplace in the Spanish-speaking world.” It is a country of uncommon natural beauty, political stability, an egalitarian ethos, well-developed healthcare, and a literacy rate approaching 100 percent. GDP per capita is roughly one-fifth of what it is in the US, but the overwhelming majority of people have enough, and this is a country that does not appear to have the vast wealth gap of our own. In Monteverde, people eat well thanks to abundant agricultural production, and they live comfortably in this temperate environment. If you consider luxuries to be vistas and wildlife that boggle the mind coupled with incredible papaya, mangos, platanos, bananas, chayote, and meats all produced locally, then many Costa Ricans live richly. However, grand houses, big cars, and other material possessions are hard to come by.

The magic of teaching

One Sunday in early November, I had a conversation with Erin about how much I miss the energy and purpose of the BBA community. The following day, the third and fourth grade teacher at my kids’ school left suddenly. It took me about a nanosecond to figure out what I should be doing next. I marched into the director’s office and told him, if needed, I could teach third and fourth grade math. He announced, “The little baby Jesus is looking out for us!” (There are many, many references to Jesus and God in this Catholic country.)

For the last two months of this sabbatical, I am teaching math to 21 third graders and 23 fourth graders. There is no better way to connect with kids than to be in the classroom, and it reminds me of all the preparation, thoughtful, emotional output, and, above all, care that goes into being a good teacher. Teachers are the lifeblood of a school.
Some more special moments

- Walking to school hand-in-hand with Phoebe (we go in early, and she helps me make copies of worksheets for class)
- Teaching Robin in my fourth grade math class; discovering the magic of the number 142,657 and cyclic numbers
- Seeing two of my girls march in the Independence Day parade, Ella playing cymbals and Phoebe banging on the drums
- Wednesday afternoon tamales and batidos with Ella before her soccer practice
- Riding the school bus home with Al and his preschool buddies, all of whom shout “Bomberos!” as we go by the firehouse each day
- Cooking dinner every night, all together
- Drinking coffee with Erin while watching an unbelievable assortment of birds flit about
- The sounds of toucans and howler monkeys in the forest
- The gift of time for the whole family to be together. Living a busy, wonderful daily life. Every day is a special moment.

El País de Dios (As told to me by a taxi driver)

When God created the Earth and all its land masses, He gave each piece of land to a different group of people who were waiting: Africa to the Africans, Europe to the Europeans, Asia to the Asians, and so forth. When he seemed to be all done giving out the land, there was one little boy remaining, hoping for a place to go. He said to God, “What about me? Where will I live?” God replied, “I have one special piece of land, the most beautiful land in the world, that I was saving for myself. I will give it to you because I know you will take care of it.” And so he gave the boy Costa Rica, the land of God. El país de Dios.

December 10 - “I’m not looking forward to leaving, but I can’t wait to get back.”

I was talking with my kids about our impending return, and Ella captured all of our sentiments perfectly: “I’m not looking forward to leaving, but I can’t wait to get back.” To me, that means this has been the perfect adventure, one in which we made meaningful connections in a new community, had an incredible array of experiences, spent an amazing amount of time together as a family, and—after all this—we get to return to a life that we love.

I return refreshed, recharged, and grateful beyond words for this special opportunity made possible by my colleagues, the board of trustees, our many supporters, the surrounding community, and our incredible students, who bring meaning to all of our work.