I used to be horrible at taking pills. And up until my fourth grade year, it had never been a big deal. Now, however, I found myself sitting in the Atlanta airport, staring hopelessly at the little white obstacle held in my sweaty hand. My brother and sister went first, and they had gagged from the mere millisecond the pill touched their tongue—and they didn’t even have to chew it. After a few minutes and few calls that our flight was boarding, it was now or never, and I knew I had only one option. With my water bottle opened and at the ready, I tossed the pill into my life and began to chew for the longest four seconds of my life. Quickly, before the rancid taste had time to set in, I began to down the water, but to no avail! The sharp taste of chloroquine felt like a Taser to the tongue, and I struggled to take one last cleansing sip of water. Once the horror of the moment was over, my brother and sister pointed to the half-full bottle and winced disgustedly at the hundreds of little tiny dots floating around. Backwash.

After one plane ride, two very bumpy car rides, one night’s stay in a hotel surrounded by howler monkeys, and two ghastly experiences chewing chloroquine pills, my family found itself in the small mountain village of Rancho Grande, Nicaragua. In the past, my parents had come here with a small medical team, doing eye surgery for those that needed it. This time, they brought my brother, my sister and me along. When they described what they had seen, I understood the words, but I had no idea of the conditions these people were actually living in. When I saw it for myself, I realized my imagination had been nowhere close to reality. I was almost too young to process that these four year old kids were being sent out by their parents to beg and fill potholes to provide for their families, using shovels that were taller than they were.

This first trip, their big bellies that I had been told were full of parasites terrified me,
and naively, I worried I would catch them. After we had passed out T Shirts and goodie bags, we tentatively tossed the ball with some of the kids and before we knew it, we had left the green mountains of Nicaragua and returned to the bare cornfields of Ohio. Once I got back, I couldn’t get their dark eyes out of my head. I remember feeling so helpless, like we were giving them one little shirt and going back to our normal lives like nothing had changed. Everywhere I looked, I could find something that reminded me of them, of everything they didn’t have. My fifth grade mind couldn’t fathom how I could know about this place and still complain when my mom packed me ham instead of salami.

I went back several more times and I took on more responsibilities, but I couldn’t shake the feeling that my role was basically insignificant. More recently, my family has been involved with a new technical school in the village, and last year I decided it was time to do something to really help these kids. Using the incentive of homemade desserts, I pitted the four classes in my school against each other in a month-long spare change drive, called “Nickels for Nicaragua.” When the drive was over, we had raised $1,000, which we used to buy backpacks and school supplies for the kids in Rancho Grande. When we delivered the bags, they were so excited that they absolutely refused to take them off.

That night, the moon was so brilliant it looked as though someone had cut a perfect circle in the black sheet of the night sky and stuck an LED flashlight through. One little girl, Elena, was especially enthralled by the sight. As she sat on my lap, she used every gap in the conversation to point it out, whispering, “La luna, la luna!” As I talked and played games with the kids until late into the night, I realized that I had wasted so much time watching them from a distance. I had wanted more than anything to help them, but I never expected to hear Elena’s voice every time I looked at the moon.