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## **The Cayman Islands: Speaking Out to End Hunger**

When I sat down to begin my research, the first step was choosing a country. There are 195 countries in the world; this does not even include territories or independent economies. I could immediately eliminate one country, my country of origin, the United States of America. One country down, only 193 countries to go. I stared at the world map and had literally no idea how to choose when suddenly I thought of a territory that was not even visible on the map: The Cayman Islands. Where better to research than the place my family would be vacationing during spring break this year? It would provide a rare opportunity to see my country of research in person.

When I communicated my choice with my teacher, he was skeptical, and honestly, I had my doubts as well. After my initial research, it seemed that The Cayman Islands were doing very well. They have sophisticated sanitation and electrical systems. They have the largest offshore banking industry in the world. What I was not expecting to find was that the Islands that are considered the “culinary capital of the Caribbean ” according to Chef’s Pencil, a food critic website (Smith), had rates of hunger that once topped Africa per capita (Smith). This discovery led me from my computer to Cayman Food Bank’s doorstep, and finally back to my computer to share their story.

The Cayman Islands consist of three islands in the western Caribbean: Grand Cayman, Little Cayman, and Cayman Brac. These islands are home to roughly 69,000 people (“Population”) and cover just over 100 square miles. These Islands are independently governed British territories and have a Parliamentary democracy. Their primary income comes from offshore banking, tourism, and the exports of boats and planes (“Cayman Islands” World Factbook). The average Cayman household will consist of 2-3 people, primarily all coming from the same families(Cayman Islands Government). On Grand Cayman, apartments are common in towns such as Georgetown, whereas houses are much more prevalent in rural areas. The climate is classified as Tropical Marine; wet summers and mild, dry winters are typical. While the tropical climate is ideal for growing crops such as citrus fruits, bananas, and coconuts, very little farming is present (“Cayman Islands” Encyclopedia). This is due to extremely rocky soil and lack of land. However, small cattle farms are prevalent.

Most of the food people in the Cayman Islands eat is not locally grown, but imported. Often imports come from America as it is the nearest major country to the islands. Most Cayman families purchase their food at grocery stores ranging in size from large bargain stores to small family convenience stores. People then prepare their food using modern appliances such as ovens, stoves, and microwaves. The majority of the people in Grand Cayman work in either finance or hospitality (“Cayman Islands: A Rich”). The average salary is \$3,240 Cayman Dollars a month, which is equivalent to 3,889 US Dollars(Smith “Average”). The fact that the amount of Cayman Dollars is smaller than the U.S. Dollars shows that the economy in the Cayman Islands surpasses the economy in the United States. In the Cayman Islands, students can attend school for free from the ages of five to sixteen (“Cayman Islands” Encyclopedia). While there are a few colleges on the island, it is not uncommon for students to go to larger countries to receive their postsecondary education. Employers in the Cayman Islands are required to cover a minimum of half the

cost of health insurance(Doe) as a benefit for their employees. Though this works well for middle-aged residents, health insurance can be expensive for elderly members of the community.

Overall, the Cayman Islands are very successful and provide a comfortable place to live and work. Because of their high level of tourism, they must project a polished image of their islands to the rest of the world so that people will continue to vacation there. Upon my arrival in Grand Cayman, it was clear to me that this tropical getaway identity held true, at least on the surface. Without some prior research, you would never be aware that in the 2021 census, 652 households reported not having enough to eat. Unfortunately, these trends are only worsening. According to a study done by the World Bank, reported by Cayman Loopnews, the Caribbean has the second highest rate of undernourishment at 18.4%. They are topped only by Africa, which has a rate of 19.9%. While the issue of hunger is associated more with Africa, prior to 2016 the Caribbean had the highest hunger rates in the world(Over).

People will likely argue that though the percentages are close, the population of Africa is significantly higher, thus many more people are hungry. While this may be true, it does not diminish the fact that a relatively large number of people in the Caribbean and the Cayman Islands are undernourished. Demographics of people most likely to struggle with hunger in the Cayman Islands are the elderly and young families. As previously mentioned, the costs of health insurance can be significant for the elderly; this can cause life-long savings to dwindle quickly. Additionally, older people have a harder time advocating for themselves and getting the resources that they need. This is why hunger among elderly people is sometimes called “Silent Hunger”(“Silent”). Young families are also at higher risk due to parents who may not have a large income and have other childcare needs in addition to food. While the economy is booming, much of the income the country receives from tourism and banking goes directly into the pockets of wealthy corporations, never to be seen by the locals. Some families are barely getting by, and due to a high number of imported food, the food families are eating is much more expensive and not as nutritious. Families are also likely to eat at convenient fast food restaurants such as Wendy’s, KFC, or Mcdonald's instead of making a healthy, home-cooked meal. These factors also contribute to the hunger crisis in the Cayman Islands.

While I was in Grand Cayman, I sat down with Mr. Gene Eden, manager of Cayman Food Bank. He explained that part of the reason offering assistance to struggling people in Grand Cayman is so difficult is because there is limited government support. With frustration, he told me “The government wants to sweep it under the rug, it’s not that bad.” Because of this passive mentality, the only funding that the food bank receives is hurricane relief money that is not used during the year. While this helps, Mr. Eden explained that this is only once a year, and can only do so much. Instead, much of the food bank's funding comes from independent corporations and individuals. This allows the food bank to purchase food and provide a free “grocery store” for those who are struggling to make ends meet.

Since there is plenty of money and resources in the Cayman Islands to feed everyone, my recommendation to solve the hunger problem is to raise awareness. Though this may seem like too simple a solution, if more people living in the Cayman Islands know how serious the problem is, then there will be more people ready to help. If more people are ready and willing to help, there will be an increase in donations of both time and money. Critics may argue that just because people are aware of the issue does not mean they will want to help. While it may be true that the government may not be the only group trying to ignore the issue, I believe that in a tight-knit community such as the Cayman Islands, people will seize the opportunity to assist others. The number of people helping will be much larger if opportunities to support their neighbors are given to them.

To begin the process of increased awareness, I would start by trying to gain more government support. To do this, people would need to begin communicating with legislators and lobbying for increased support for adequate nutrition. This could be in the form of a stipend going directly to community members, or as monetary assistance for food banks so they can help more people. It could even be physical food given directly to people. In India, the government provides rice, wheat, and other coarse grains for those in need (“4 Ways”). Since this system has worked in India, it could work in the Cayman Islands as well. Additionally, since it is apparent that larger companies are benefiting greatly from the Cayman Islands’ economy, people could lobby for the minimum wage to be increased. This would put more money in the pockets of average citizens.

While government support and acknowledgment of the issue will be a big help, for food banks to be successful they also need support from businesses. When I was talking with Mr. Eden, he admitted that at times donations are minimal, and he has feared that they will have to close down. To help raise support and money, I suggest that the food banks host an annual or biannual event. This could involve all of the local food banks, allowing them to join together to increase awareness. Businesses could be asked to sponsor the fundraiser and the event would be open to the public. The food banks could have speakers talk about why this issue is important and how people could help. Individuals who have been assisted by the food bank’s resources could share their stories and encourage others to seek help if they need it. By hosting these events, the issue of hunger in the Cayman Islands would be brought to the spotlight. Individuals and businesses would feel inspired to help and those in need of support could feel more comfortable connecting with a food bank.

Outside these events, food banks should increase their social media presence and possibly even put ads in the paper. While I was in Grand Cayman, I was reading a local newspaper and saw a story about Meals on Wheels, an organization that provides food for elderly people who have trouble getting out and about. They shared that there has been an increased need and not enough government support. While this wasn’t a positive story, it still helped to get their name out there and increase awareness. Other food banks could have stories or even regular ads in the paper encouraging people to donate or volunteer to support their cause. Even more widely spread than newspapers, social media accounts would allow food banks to share updates quickly with people beyond the islands’ shores.

By increasing awareness, and with any luck, increasing donations, food banks across the islands will have more money and more support to help those in need. However, with additional government funding and acknowledgment of the issue, hopefully, fewer people will have to rely on food banks to get the nutritious food they need. If people have enough food and are well-nourished, they will be more successful in school and at work. They will also be likely to spend more money, which will then benefit local business owners and allow those people to be better off. If the government, businesses, food banks, and individuals alike can come together to fight the hunger crisis in the Cayman Islands, then everyone will benefit.

I was extremely grateful that I was able to visit Grand Cayman and see the Cayman Islands in person. Mr. Eden was very generous with his time and helped me to have a much better understanding of the hunger crisis in the Cayman Islands. I hope that people will take the time to do research before making assumptions about countries, and even more, I hope that people will have the opportunity to visit those places themselves. By learning more about the world and each other, we will be better equipped to solve the problems that are impacting us all.

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