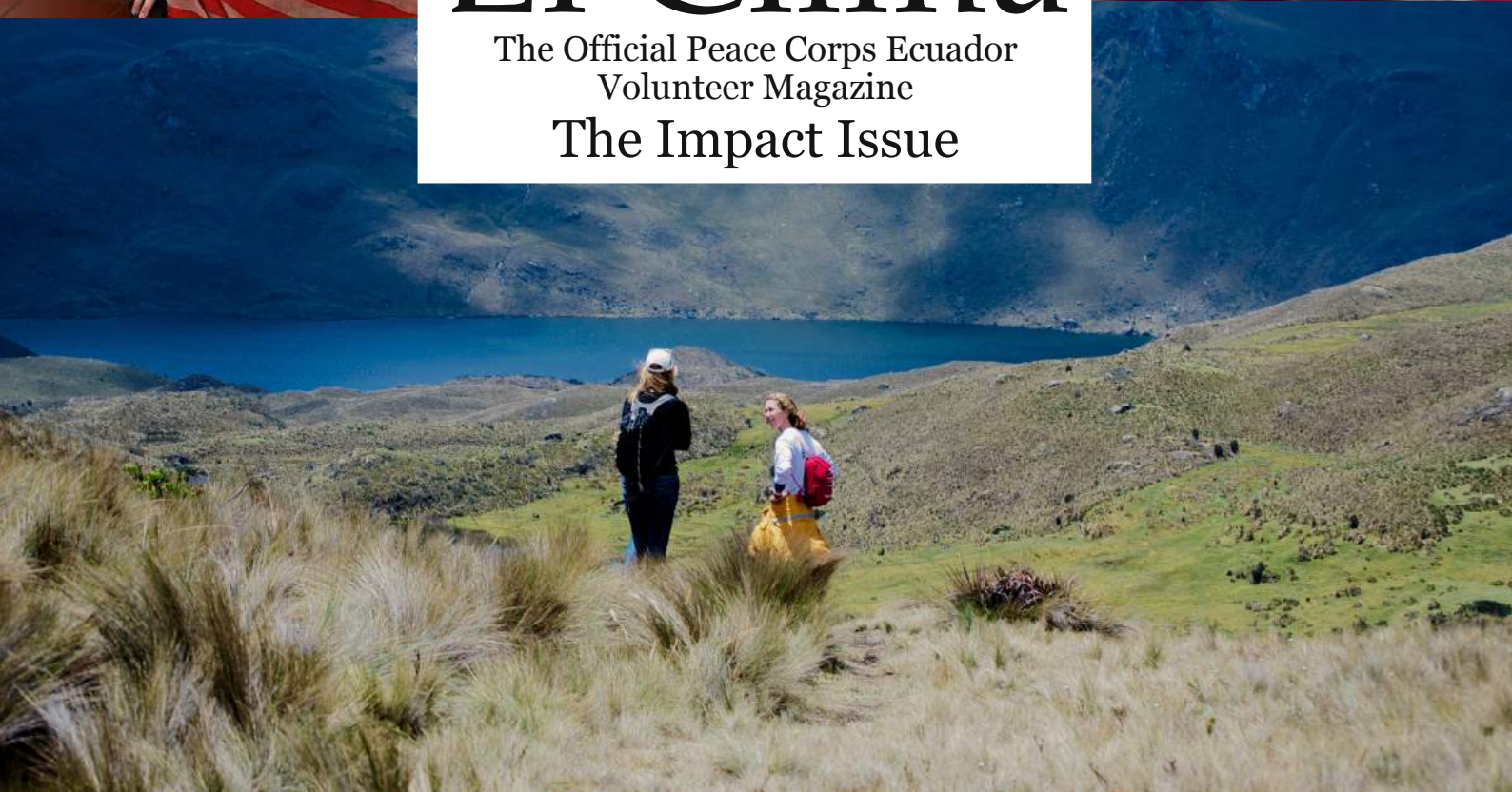




# El Clima

The Official Peace Corps Ecuador  
Volunteer Magazine

The Impact Issue



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# Editor's Note

The impact of Peace Corps service is a concept as difficult to define as it is variable.

Whether it is a fleeting moment of connection with one community member or meeting a long-term project goal, volunteers often discover impact in unexpected and subtle ways.

For February's issue, *El Clima* has decided to explore the various manifestations of meaningful service, especially as it concerns the impact of professional goals achieved, cultural lessons learned, and personal growth and relationships gained across a span of two years and three months.

The articles inside

approach the impact of our service as reciprocal, where individual volunteers learn and grow from their experience as much as their host communities do.

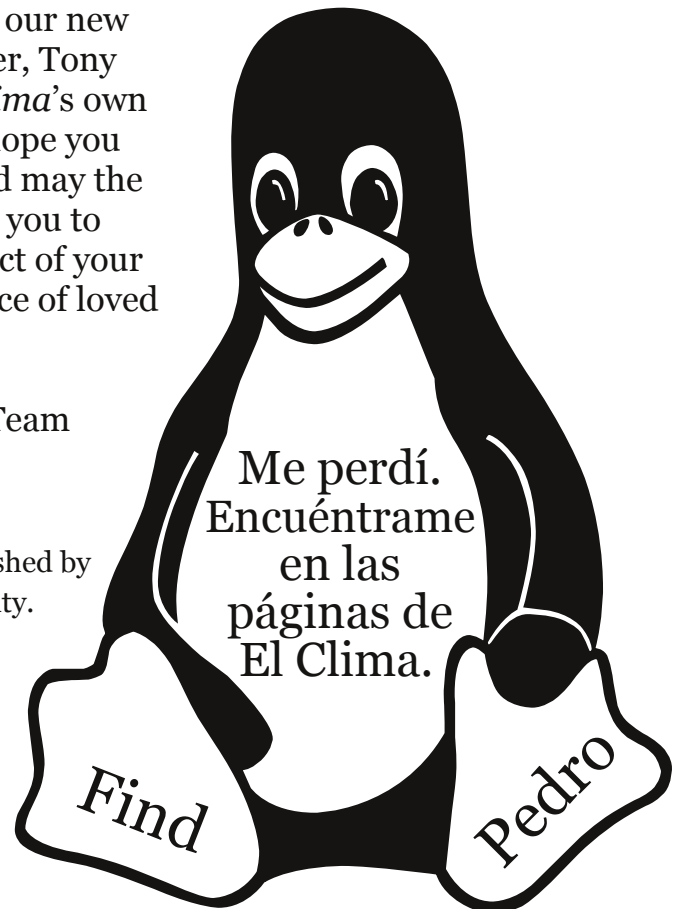
As of January, *El Clima* is happy to welcome Omnibus 115 aboard and wish them the very best that training and service have to offer.

Congratulations to our new PCVLs: Erin Fischer, Tony Romero, and *El Clima's* own Chris Owens. We hope you enjoy the issue, and may the articles inside help you to reflect on the impact of your service or the service of loved ones abroad.

*Saludos,*  
*El Clima's eTeam*

*El Clima* is a digital publication written, organized, and published by Peace Corps volunteers for the broader Peace Corps community.

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# Work Impact

Top: Some PCVs help with a beach clean up.  
Bottom left: 114ers celebrate host family day.  
Bottom right: Robert Jamieson's world map.





Author and coworker Jesus Astudillo visit a student's mother in the San Roque Market.

# Time i\$ Money

Article by Wyatt Clay

photos by Roberto "Bear" Guerra

A couple of months ago, a fellow volunteer and I were discussing two different models of "a volunteer": someone who would come work in-country for a couple of months and use thousands of dollars to fund their trip versus someone who would just donate the money to the organization and let them sort out what to do with it.

In assessing which would have greater impact, they favored the second model.

I would be lying if I said I didn't initially agree with them. Especially with a non-profit organization that is

under constant financial stress—why not just donate the money instead of a volunteer buying a plane ticket and paying to live in Ecuador?

As Peace Corps volunteers, we have chosen to dedicate two years to try and make an impact in some way. But what "impact" actually means and how we are supposed to achieve it is somewhat of a debate.

The most defining factors of Peace Corps are that we focus on integrating and becoming a long-term part of the community and that we

live at the same basic economic level as members of the community. But what about volunteers that aren't working for two years? At what point does the dedication of time outweigh the value of the money you would have been able to donate?

There are volunteers who will work for a week, two weeks, a month, six months, or even a year. But when you look at the costs they pay in order to offer their assistance, what else could be done with those funds? The discussion that I have had with my counterparts is essentially this: what value does service have for someone who is barely here long enough to learn the bus routes? Our decision: a lot.

Less than a month ago, we had two new volunteers come to work at my organization.

They are a married couple from Brazil and had been in contact with us for months about the opportunities we had for them. When they explained that they were planning on only being here for two weeks, I wrote them

off as not being worth it.

To my surprise, they still showed up to our organization without any real plan, the only agreement was that they would be with us for two weeks.

I do my best to meet every new person with an open mind but it was difficult as I was already biased against what I thought was going to be egotistical couple who thought they could save the world in two weeks. And that we needed to drop everything we were doing to include them. I couldn't have been more wrong.

They jumped head first into every program they could and tried to use their natural talents and learned abilities to help in every way possible. Not only did they try their hardest to give assistance, but they did so with charismatic passion and genuine concern.

That was when I was

rejuvenated by the idea that attitude is so much more important than anything else in the life of a volunteer.

Since then, I have realized that you don't need 27 months to change a community. You only need ten minutes to have an impact for good or for bad. Of course, from a Peace Corps program sustainability standpoint, it may stand to reason that we need to be in our communities, working at it every day.

However, the true determiner of what kind of influence a volunteer will have is in their approach to daily routine. It might not be a youth-group student, it might not be the family that is taking part in a community bank; but it could be the owner of the nearby tienda, or the parent who appreciates the rest provided by a relinquished seat on a

crowded bus.

Influence can come in even the briefest of interactions. Approaching every aspect of daily life with compassion and a positive, welcoming attitude will open doors—literally and figuratively.

From these experiences and this realization, I have changed the way I value my time in relation to my ability to have an impact. In 27 months, I have many opportunities for these interactions, but it is all a matter of attitude.

I have met some amazing volunteers who inspire others to work harder and to try to do more with more energy. As shown by a lovely Brazilian couple, more time does not equal more success.

Let us say, instead, that more passion means more opportunities to have a positive influence.

*Left: Author and international volunteers help with the preschool program in the Camal Market. Right: Children play in the San Roque market.*



# A Teacher *among* Teachers

*Frank Bishop*

There are many definitions of what makes a great teacher. It's a matter open to endless debate.

Statistics and test results—I'll leave those at the door. None of these quantitative measurements are my concern because they

all serve to remove the human element from the equation. No, I want to shed some light on that human element so often neglected in this ever-raging debate. For this task, I don't need stats or state evaluations.

I know a great teacher.

The teacher's name is Paolo, and he embodies every quality that an educator should possess.

Paolo never saw himself as a teacher. His degree is in engineering. Coming out of college, he had a difficult time finding work, so he eventually took a job at a school. One would think that with an engineering background, his subject would have been something to do with math or the sciences.

Turns out, that wasn't the case. Instead, he was made an English teacher. In the beginning, it may have been just a placeholder for him. It is fairly common to see folks in Ecuador get saddled with positions in education for the sake of drawing a paycheck. Besides the woes inherent to them, such scenarios as Paolo's carry with them their own potential: that of breeding apathy or unwitting incompetence on the part of people essentially forced into these educational roles.

Thankfully, things played out differently for Paolo. He came to love his job rather than resent it. He had a

*Teacher Paolo Haro celebrates his birthday with friends, cake, and musical accompaniment.*



knack for teaching and then found that he had a passion for it.

Fast forward a bit and he even found himself participating in the Go-Teacher program sponsored by the Ministry of Education. He flew off to the U.S. for several months, leaving his friends, family and everything he'd ever known to live in a different culture and study different methods for teaching.

He also improved his language skills immensely during this time. Upon return, he was eager to share what he had absorbed during his time in the States.

Many of the skills and attitudes brought home with him epitomize why Paolo is a truly great teacher.

First, he is respectful to his students and treats them as young adults with responsibilities. When they do not meet their responsibilities, he holds them accountable. Whether it is punctuality or poor grades, he accepts no excuses.

He does not lash out at

the students; rather, he sternly explains to them the gravity of a situation, then tells them that they have a chance to do better next time.

He leads by example. If he expects his students to be on time for class, he is on time for class. When students need extra help, he is there, taking time to explain things a second or third time to ensure better understanding. And, perhaps most importantly, he is a

There are many definitions of a great teacher—surely one of these should include the kind of care and respect that Paolo shows his students.

lifelong student. He is always open to new methods and new ideas. His content knowledge grows stronger every day.

For each of these reasons and more, Paolo has the respect of his peers and his students. They look up to him as more of a mentor than an authority figure, though he can be the latter when pressed.

If we're talking results, he gets those, too. His students'

scores are the best in the school. His standards are high, and, more often than not, they are met.

There exists a trust between him and his students. There are fewer instances of cheating and tardiness in his classes, not because he is a disciplinarian, but because his students don't want to let him down. In kind, he tries his best never to let them down either.

I've worked with Paolo for a couple of semesters now. Watching and helping him work has been a privilege because he doesn't seem to be working

at all—he is relating. In doing so, he is molding his students into people who will push and expect more from themselves.

There are many definitions of a great teacher—surely one of these should include the kind of care and respect that Paolo shows his students. Seeing the extraordinary impact he makes on his students' lives is rapidly making an impact on my own.



# Call Me *Mary Poppins*

Zackery Hersh

The only time I've ever lost my patience with a teacher, we were planning in the library after a lesson that had just gone horribly wrong.

My teacher wanted the students to make a dialogue, which is a fairly good idea. Yet during the lesson, she didn't really give any instructions. She didn't tell them how long it needed to be, what needed to be included, how many times each person should speak—just that they needed to do a dialogue. She also neglected to explain what exactly a dialogue was. Of course the students were confused, unfocused, and frustrated. We had wasted an entire class.

This was partly my fault. That week we had not had time to finish all of her lesson plans, so, at the last minute, she said that she was going to do a dialogue. I told her that sounded great.

Naively, I had no idea how unorganized and unproductive it would be. All this was okay; mistakes and errors are a part of the learning process. But when we were reviewing the class, I asked her how she thought it went and what had happened. She told me this:

“Zack, the students, they don't want to learn. They are bad.”

I lost it. I had been trained extensively on how it is culturally acceptable for teachers in Ecuador to blame

the students, but none of that seemed to matter in context.

Out came a hurricane of English and Spanish, bluntly explaining the extent of how badly we had failed that class. Between breaths, I took a moment to look around and realized that not only had raised my voice well above the library-appropriate level, but I was also standing.

I sat back down, paused to think, translated that thought into Spanish, looked at her, and quietly but firmly said:

“*No es justo a los estudiantes que tienen toda la culpa de cada clase que fracase.*”

It's not fair to the students that we blame all the failures in the class on them.

*Students work during an English class with the author at Colegio Uruguay in Portoviejo.*



As a Peace Corps volunteer I often equate myself to Mary Poppins. There are several reasons why:

- Mary Poppins spends the entire movie trying to improve the ways of the Banks family, much like I spend the majority of my time trying to improve the ways of my teachers.

- Once the improvements had taken place and she was no longer needed, she had to go back to where she came from—just as I will have to leave after my service.

- Occasionally Mary Poppins went on adventures into cartoon lands that had absolutely nothing to do with the plot, much like I sometimes wonder what I'm doing as a Peace Corps volunteer vacationing in Montañita.

- We both break out in

song regardless of how those around us feel about it.

But let's focus on the first point. Mary Poppins and I both entered an environment as an outsider, allowing us to see the easily identify problems that had become a normal way of life, despite the negative effects. We both enter a culture and then try our best to change it.

Changing a culture is the last the thing I thought I would be doing in Ecuador, or wanted to be doing as a Peace Corps volunteer. I was expecting the opposite. I wanted the culture to change me, make me better.

Yet this is the job that TEFL volunteers face in our schools every day. We are tasked with improving Ecuadorian English teaching culture by working alongside the very English teachers that cultivated or continue

cultivating the existing culture.

For instance, take the aforementioned story. This is just one type of thinking I'm trying to change: that students are bad or they just don't want learn.

It's not just different from what I believe; it has negative effects on the students' ability to take in the information and their motivational level to do so.

The science in the field of education has repeatedly shown that students need positive environments in order to succeed at their studies. Research has also shown that rewarding effort and hard work instead of achievement will lead to more motivated students.

When teachers yell at students in class and focus on their many mistakes instead of their small

*Left: Students perform a question and answer speaking activity. Right: Students enthusiastically pose for a photograph for their favorite volunteer.*



successes, they create a culture that does not allow for successful learning. And to add insult to injury, they then rationalize their actions because the students yield poor results.

A culture of thought and practice, no matter how big or small, does not simply change with a spoonful of sugar.

But to be fair to Mary Poppins, she had magical powers and an umbrella that could talk, which is probably why she was able to accomplish her tasks in what seemed like a long English weekend.

On the other hand, I am blessed with an adequate level of Spanish and the ability to sweat through a

shirt in under twenty minutes. So, I need slightly more time. And a lot more patience.

One of the things I learned very quickly when co-planning with my Ecuadorian counterparts is the importance of patience. Between the language barrier and the knowledge barrier, there is a lot for them to learn and process; and it is just as daunting for them as it is for me. And sometimes success is not achieved.

Consider the story above. Sure, my teacher didn't do the best job with her lesson planning and her students, but I did a worse job at providing her guidance. In losing my temper, I failed her. I didn't guide her toward

the learning; I tried to yell it at her. It was very un-Mary-Poppins of me.

But in changing a culture, I've found that there are no big battles to be won. It's consistent practice and many conversations.

It's leading by example and celebrating your successes no matter how small. It takes time and not everything will permeate in the ways that you want, but some things will.

After I had taken a break to calm down, I went back and finished my planning session with my teacher. I decided to do some role-play. I had her re-teach the lesson to me, and I pretended to be a student. She gave me the assignment, and I turned in a paper with two lines written on it and then asked her if it was good work. She told me I needed to write more. I started to ask her about all those instructions she had left out.

She started to catch on, and we came up with a list of things she needed to request for a dialogue. At the end our planning session, she pleaded with me again:

"Zack, the students, they are so bad, they do not listen."

I replied, "No. The students are good. But their English is bad. Their English is low."

"Yes," she agreed, "their English is very low."

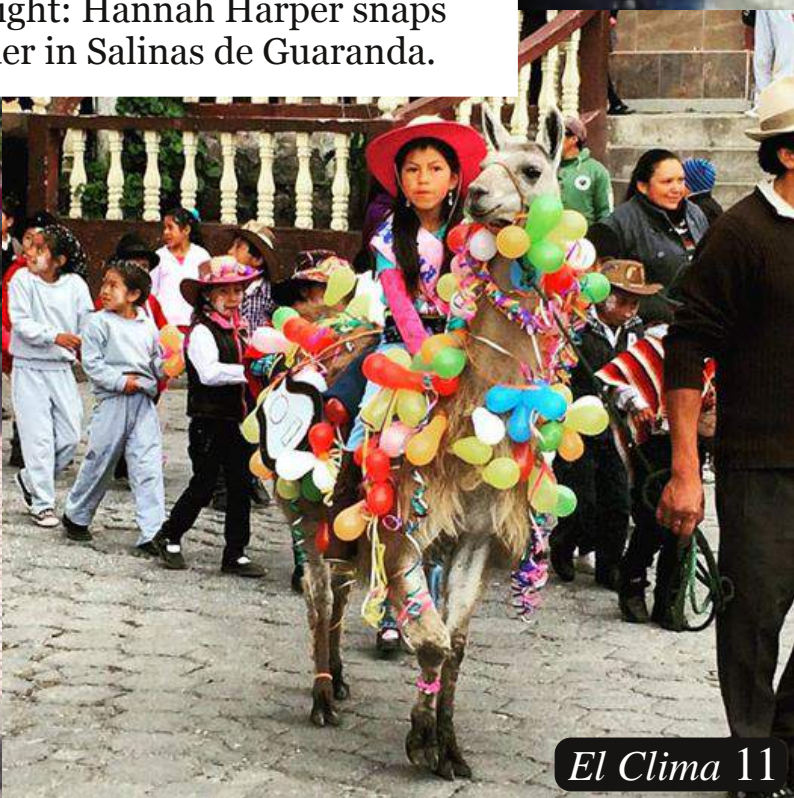
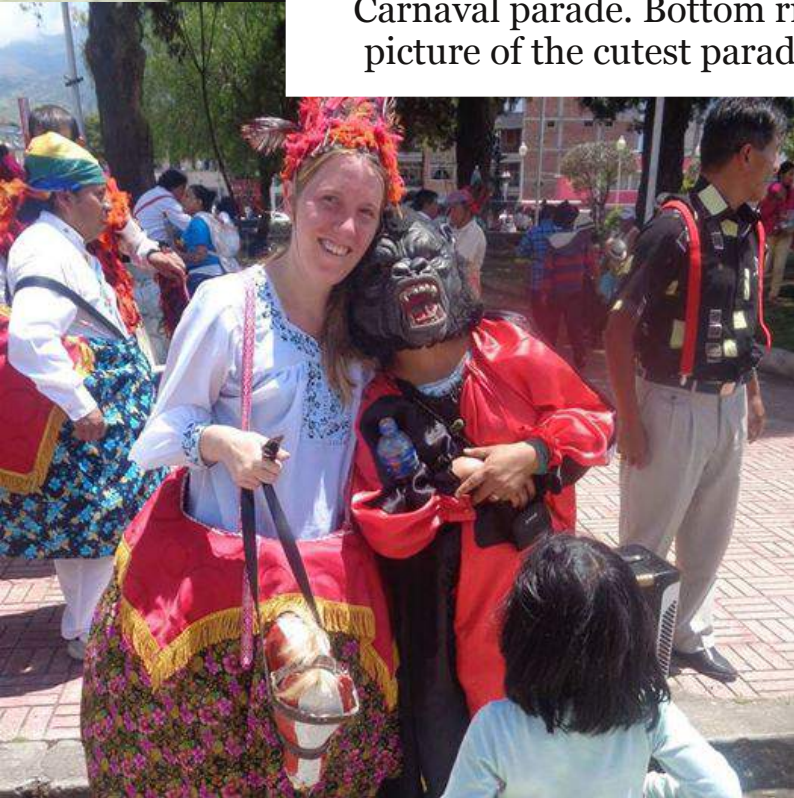
*Students wait for an activity; one passes the time by drawing.*





# Cultural Impact

Top: Krystal Krejcik celebrates Carnival with soccer team.  
Bottom left: Patrice Davison participates in Guaranda's Carnival parade.  
Bottom right: Hannah Harper snaps picture of the cutest parader in Salinas de Guaranda.



# Family Matters

*Jonathan VanTreeck*

When I left the United States to serve in the Peace Corps, I knew I was taking a huge risk. I was saying goodbye to a lot of things I loved: Chipotle burritos, nights out with my best friends, and more than anything, my family.

I've always made an effort to be close to my family. When I went to college, I was less than a two-hour bus ride away from them. Even after graduating, I decided to live and work in Chicago, the city closest to my hometown.

Now that I live in Ecuador, being a time zone and a continent away from my family is certainly one of my biggest challenges.

Being removed from my own family dynamic and living in Ecuador has allowed me to observe differences in the cultural value of family. In my experience, family is a vital part of Ecuadorian culture.

I live in a small, rural community called San Pablito de Agualongo. Here, everyone's family members

either live in the community or fewer than fifteen minutes away.

This looks quite different in the U.S. I've told Ecuadorians that living "close" to a relative in the States might be an hour-and-a-half drive to the suburbs as opposed to a three-minute walk. And when families in my site have free time on the weekend, it is spent watching or playing soccer, selling their homemade food, or going on day trips together.

In my first Ecuadorian family, my host dad spent weekends taking care of his ill father while my host mom took care of her mother—who lives in their house.

In my current host family, my host grandfather became quite sick and needed to stay in a Quito hospital for several nights.

After finding out, my host mother and her siblings collectively agreed to take turns spending the night with their father in the hospital over an hour away.

And when my host dad's brother was recently



hospitalized, the first thing my host family did was visit him along with my host uncle's siblings, wife, and kids.

This unspoken sense of urgency to be with loved ones is what has struck me the most.

While I have tended to stay close to my family, I would say most young U.S. citizens are focused on moving on and finding their own way. In the U.S. there is a noticeably bigger push for independence.

When you're eighteen, it's a chance to move away from home. After university, it's time to get a job and maybe move somewhere else. After you are financially stable, it's time to get married and possibly raise children without the support from extended family.

While this isn't the case for all U.S. Americans, the key element in the trend is the unspoken implication of moving away from your family, not closer to it.

This is quite the opposite in Ecuador. Up until someone is ready to get married or have a kid, they will live with their family—and even then, if they can't afford a separate

house, they'll live at home until they are financially prepared.

The honest truth is, besides my parents, I'm not particularly emotionally close with any of my extended family. I know they mean well, but it can be frustrating at times when they forget I played Ultimate Frisbee all four years of college or what I majored in. There's just not as much depth in those relationships as there is with my mom and dad.

Essentially, living in Ecuador has helped me appreciate the cultural value of family togetherness and

accept the culture of my extended family. It's also expanded my concept of what a family looks like and how to be a supportive family member.

Being immersed in such a tight-knit, loving environment has inspired me to reach out to relatives I don't normally talk with. But more than anything, it's made me immensely thankful for the relationship I have with my mom and dad—for their unconditional love and support.

I'm learning that closeness doesn't always equate with distance...and that family matters. A lot.

*Author and Pre-Service Training host family pose after he swore in as a Peace Corps volunteer.*



# Giving Thanks *for* Bellamaria

Melissa Carrera

I still recall the day I was given my Peace Corps site assignment and how captivated I was by the name of the town where I would be living and serving for the next two years: Bellamaria. The beauty of the name was soon shown to mirror the beauty of its people.

I have fallen in love with the wonderful people in my community more quickly than expected. Above all, the inner beauty of those who have warmly welcomed me into their homes and community has moved me.

Two weeks prior to Thanksgiving, my counterpart tasked me with planning an end-of-the-year activity for the youth in our community. With the holidays looming and being so far from loved ones back home, I couldn't help but feel nostalgic. In the midst of all of the emotion, I

thought, *what a great opportunity to have a cross-cultural exchange and celebrate Thanksgiving in Bellamaria.*

Food always brings people together. Especially in a small town like Bellamaria, there is huge significance behind sharing meals with loved ones and neighbors. I figured, what better way to share American culture than by eating tons of turkey, mashed potatoes, and macaroni and cheese? Plus, my counterpart was all about having a *fiesta con comida* (party with food) at any cost.

Initially, the Thanksgiving dinner was going to be for our youth group of about 20 boys and girls, but my counterpart wanted to extend the invite to each of the 150 youth in Bellamaria. She felt this would not only be a great platform for youth integration and participation in community



Some of the Bellamaria youth on Thanksgiving.

activities but also an opportunity for them get to know me.

I had never hosted an event for so many people, but I had so much support from my counterpart organization, colleagues, and fellow Peace Corps volunteers. With all of the helping hands and endless laughter, I truthfully enjoyed every moment leading up to the big event.

Even after all of the running around, buying ingredients, preparing food—the stress of not knowing the first thing about making a turkey—and decorating the makeshift dining hall in the town's coliseum, I stopped and took the time to appreciate the

process of it all. I was also able to recognize and appreciate the close bonds I have made with members in my community.

Hosting Thanksgiving in Ecuador not only meant a lot to me, but it also meant a lot to my community. For many of the youth who attended, it was their first time eating macaroni and cheese and tasting the *gringo* version of mashed potatoes.

It also gave them an opportunity to reflect on the significance of Thanksgiving. I also talked about cherishing the moments spent with friends and family members during the holiday season.

I also emphasized my unique experience serving as an Ecuadorean-American Peace Corps volunteer. The Thanksgiving celebration gave youth a chance to better understand how people from different backgrounds embrace diverse traditions and customs when it comes to holidays in the United States.

The most important message I wanted my youth to take away is how the holiday season can be summed up in one word: family. My definition of family has been



re-shaped during my time in Bellamaria. My immediate family members, friends, and extended relatives in the states aren't my only family; now my family also includes my host parents, host siblings, coworkers, and even the neighborhood store owners who sell my favorite Ecuadorean treats.

I have learned to value what matters the most during the holiday season: the time I share with those who make me feel right at home—even if I'm miles away.

Beyond the hectic Thanksgiving preparations and planning, the essence of being thankful was ever so present the night of the event. In total, 155 people ate Thanksgiving dinner. Of the 155, 130 were youth and children. The night ended with cake, prizes, and, of course, dancing.

This was the first time Bellamaria celebrated Thanksgiving, but it certainly will not be the last. I have 18 months of service left, and I can certainly say I have a new understanding of why the people of Bellamaria are so beautiful both inside and out.

Top: Author and Luis Armijos, who helped set up and serve food, with the cake. Middle: Bellamaria's first Thanksgiving table. Bottom: Rosa Encalada and author's counterpart's family prepare one of many turkeys.



# Goal Failed

Bonnie Jean

Peace Corps: two years spent in a foreign land making a difference, changing lives, and helping create a better world. A very worthy mission. Although, as it turns out, too noble for me. Instead, the daily goal I set is to attempt not to make a

*Author embarrasses herself for others' pleasure.*



complete fool out of myself. I would like to share just one of the many times I have failed to reach that goal.

My favorite seat on the bus is right behind the driver. As an American of average height, everything in Ecuador is too small for me. The benefit of the front seat is getting to prop my legs up on the window, right under the *no poner pies* (don't put up your feet) sign. Yeah, you could say I'm kind of a rebel. If this sounds disrespectful to you, don't worry. Karma always comes back around—except this time, karma's justice felt like a full-force upper cut, a cheap shot to the face.

On this particular trip, I was headed up north to help another volunteer with an HIV *charla* (academic chat). I had been running late, so I crammed my purse full of what I needed and jumped on the bus. Happy to find my seat available, I got comfy and quickly dozed off. I awoke with a start to my stop being called. In a panic, I

jumped up and attempted to take the first step toward the exit. My legs, however, were not ready for the job. Having been propped up for a couple hours, they too had been asleep.

I took that first step, my legs in utter revolt. To say I merely fell would be an understatement. I went down hard. There were body parts bouncing off things, people being tripped over, and stuff being thrown across the bus. My mother would disown me if she had heard the stream of profanities spilling from my mouth.

I need to pause here with the mental image of me falling across the bus frozen for a brief moment to explain or, rather, to justify the contents of my purse. Please, those with weak stomachs, avert your gaze because this is not for the fint-hearted.

Understandably, I had grabbed a few demonstration condoms for the HIV *charla*. I had also grabbed tampons before leaving because I was

starting my menstrual cycle. In a rush from running late, I hadn't just grabbed a couple. Nope. Not nearly embarrassing enough. Instead, I brought the entire box of "Tampax Tampons without Applicator."

There I was, suspended in midair, falling to my inevitable fate with my purse flinging majestically, tumbling end over end like a dexterous circus performer across the aisle.

This moment unfolded as one of those unique montages of super speed in super slow-mo. Here, time itself speeds up and slows down as if only to mock you.

Fast-forward now to the moment I met my unwanted destination: the trash-covered and sticky bus floor. As I crawled on my hands and knees, I looked up and saw that the entire contents of my purse had spread out in front of a woman.

She had to be the mother and grandmother to at least fifty people, so wizened was her visage. She wore a loose, flowered dress and had short white hair. She bent over to

help gather my things. After a moment, she stared up at me. Her light eyes were clouded with wisdom and disappointment, and she held out my snake of condoms in her trembling hand. The condoms were in the form of those accordion wallet picture holders.

Instead of cute pictures of kids and loved ones, it proudly proclaimed that it was, in fact, double lubricated and ribbed for her pleasure.

I finally got back to my feet. As I grabbed the condoms from the wizened grandmother, I said, "Thanks! I'm certainly going to be needing these later."

Cleansing her hands of my sin, she began to cross herself, praying for my hell-bound soul, "Father, Son, and the Holy Spirit."

My legs, still unstable but motivated by adrenaline, I briskly limped down the stairs. The bus attendant handed me my purse and helped me gather the rest of my things. As the bus drove off, the sound of laughter fading behind it—and with blood dripping down my

knees, a snake of condoms falling out my pocket, and both hands cupped around a couple dozen cotton tampon bullets—I began to notice that I did not recognize any of my surroundings.

In that moment, I realized that the ticket guy calls out the name of the towns before you get there to get people to board the bus, not to tell you where you are.

Lesson learned but daily goal failed.

*Author has fun in the campo; a tree has fun, too.*





# Personal Impact

Top: PCVs explore Caja National Park. Bottom left: Some 114ers hang out on the coast. Bottom right: Lucy Krips at Cajas National Park, by Zackery Hersh.





# Love *in the* time of Chuyayacu

*Alicea Settlemoir*

I'm no romantic, and I haven't had much romantic luck thus far in my life. I do, however, believe that my relationship with the community of Chuyayacu in the Amazon region of Ecuador can be described like a romance: unsure beginnings, laughter, tears, disappointments, and plenty of awkward moments.

Upon our first encounter, I said: "My name is Alicea. I am a Natural Resources Conservation volunteer. I

live in Puyo, Pastaza and work with a number of smaller communities in the countryside outside of Puyo."

From the beginning, it was clear that my other half would be high maintenance and that our relationship would require compromise.

Chuyayacu is the most rural community we work with and is indigenous Kitchwa—a beautiful cultural group that wakes up at 4am to drink tea, bathe in the river, and disappear into the

jungle for days on hunting expeditions. To arrive at Chuyayacu, you have to catch a 5:30am bus that takes you two hours into the jungle, at times navigating over rough terrain.

It wasn't love at first sight by any stretch of the imagination. There was a lot of waiting and not much to do. Upon return from our second date, a bridge was closed, and I ended up walking hours in the hot sun to get to a location where I could catch a bus. After that day, I vowed never to return.

To the object of my affection, I was just a pretty face. As was the case in many past relationships, I wanted desperately for Chuyayacu to see me as intelligent, skilled, interesting, and funny—not just someone who is pleasant to look at.

I continued to go out with Chuyayacu, and it grew on me. The community members learned my name, from young babies to elderly women who spoke only Kitchwa. Walking through the community, I began to hear my name spoken as if

by a lover trapped in the honeymoon phase: *Alicea*.

I began giving classes, English and Eco-club, and we started a project to map and zone the community. I guess you could say we were going steady.

We would go on walks to enjoy nature, swim in the river, and eat *guavas*. My students would bear climb to the top of papaya trees to bring me the bright, round fruit. They would paint my face with *huitu* (a local plant-based dye) and invite me to parties.

They also started seeing me as more than just a pretty *gringa*. They asked me to speak at the assembly meetings and laughed when I made jokes. They asked for

my opinions on possible projects, all the while respectfully calling me *licenciada* (graduate). It was going well.

No relationship is perfect, though. Sometimes Chuyayacu would flake out on our dates, then arrive the next time with a gift for me, as any other man bringing flowers to the woman he scorned.

On multiple occasions, we miscommunicated; I made the long trip out just to turn around and go back. Then there were a series of breakups, like when I got lost in the jungle and when I got violently sick from the *chicha* (local drink) I was served.

We had our share of awkward moments, like

when my Eco-club decorated a planter for me. Glued onto it were my name written in tiny rocks, a wing torn off a butterfly, a small frog (recently dead), and a grasshopper (still alive and twitching for release).

Then there was the time when the baby sister of a student wandered into the middle of the classroom, dropped her pants, and peed on the floor.

Despite all of this, I can't help but be in love. It's obvious to any outsider that I somehow belong to this community—and that Chuyayacu loves me.

The good moments outweigh the bad, and love isn't easy. It's about compromise.

Left: Author with her 6th and 7th graders. Right: Author and intern explore the jungle with a group of men from Chuyayacu prior to getting lost.



# More *than* Blood

*Alyssa Micek*

As I have completed the one year benchmark as a Peace Corps volunteer in Ecuador, I have reflected a lot on my values and beliefs.

Ecuador is a very family-centered culture, which is something I was not accustomed to prior to coming here. I was even a bit resistant to the concept initially, because I had been somewhat estranged from my own family since I was eighteen years old.

The first six months in the country were really hard for me, but building relationships with my colleagues, students, and people in the community has helped me feel a sense of belonging to this beautiful place I now call home.

These relationships have served me in numerous ways, from when I need help

with a project at school to sharing personal advice to simply having someone to hang out with.

I attribute the relationships I have with my students to being involved in events at school, spending time in the classrooms teaching, and, most importantly, starting our English club!

One of my favorite

memories from the club is when we wrote what we were thankful for during Thanksgiving. We made a tree of gratitude and each shared why we were thankful for, which was a way to gain insight into each another's lives.

These experiences have opened the door for me to get to know my students on a more personal level: to find out what their interests are, what careers they want to pursue, and to simply be available when they need to talk. Being a supportive figure for my students has

*Author and a class of segundos (US: eleventh grade) made a Thanksgiving tree of gratitude.*



helped me feel more integrated and useful in my school community.

In regards to my colleagues, they have helped me in immeasurable ways and continue to do so on a daily basis. The more we work together, the more we learn about one another and the easier it becomes to have flow in the classroom.

My co-teachers have been influential in my life because they have lifted me up when I was down. For example, there was a week when I really missed my family and my counterparts noticed that, so they invited me to hang out that weekend to spend time with their family. They wanted

**“Near or far, my family will always be close to me.”**

me to feel at home and welcomed as a daughter. That really meant a lot to me! They encourage me and appreciate working with me in ways that help me see the value and impact of my service on those around me. These relationships are invaluable and have helped



*Author and teachers of many departments in the high school pose in their new school uniforms.*

me reflect on personal relationships back home with my family. Being a Peace Corps volunteer in Ecuador has opened my eyes to the necessity of having family close to your heart, no matter the distance. I have since reconnected with my mom and my brother, with whom I didn't have much of a relationship. Now we talk nearly every week!

Being in regular contact with my family has really helped me in my service because they remind me of

how hard I worked to be where I am today.

I have found myself in a much calmer and happier state of mind. The influence of Ecuadorian culture has shifted my perception immensely, and I have grown to love my family more than ever before. It has helped me heal and grow as a person. Near or far, my family will always be close to me and I am forever thankful for this change in my life.

Life will always be full of challenges and ups and downs; but I have learned to let go, lean in, and love those around me.



Left: English Dept. Thanksgiving potluck. Middle: Dedicated students review after school. Right: English Dept. welcomes new PCV Zackery Hersh.

# Three Things

*Yajaira Hernandez*

As the end of my service approaches, I have begun to think about how I started.

In January 2014, just out of college, I came to Ecuador as a Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) Peace Corps Volunteer (PCV)—a drastic shift from my original assignment as a Youth Development PCV in Africa. I came to Ecuador with the knowledge from my handbook and little else.

I had some knowledge about the politics of the Amazon Rainforest and freedom of the press, of little help to a TEFL PCV. In allowing myself to be guided solely by Peace Corps' documents, I arrived in country with few expectations.

I rapidly came to find out that I loved the mountains, environment, food, and coffee that the country had to offer. Weeks later when I was told I would be living on the coast, my downward spiral started. I hated the idea. In my mind, I would never love it—and I didn't for a long time. But, after repeated nights of crying and homesickness, I told myself that if I kept it up, I would not survive the journey.

I changed my goal to having three things that I was thankful for in my site every day. These things ranged greatly from having fresh pineapple to accessing good transportation to having a school with internet.

As I continued this practice—and I still do—I began to change. There are some things that will never change, whether good or bad, and I will stand up for them. I am still very organized and stick to my guns.

But with other things, my reactions have changed, like when I rush to school just to find out our meeting time was changed to an hour later or when people don't e-mail me what they said they would. I just sit in the library and read or visit with teachers—I get over it. I don't sweat the small stuff.

When I wake up in the winter time, for the 44th day in a row without water, I instinctively reach for the bucket to take a shower.



These might not seem like big changes, but for someone who is used to her routine...they are.

These changes did not come solely from within but from those around me. Maybe the way things are done here are not a reflection on my approach...Hey, I am in another country. I slowly began to realize that the Ecuadorian way isn't the wrong way but one of many ways. For example, no one is ever late to anything; they are just on their own schedule.

This has been the greatest learning experience: the simplicity of accepting things as they are. It is my

responsibility to adapt and learn. It is the only way to be happy.

I did not come to Ecuador with the intention of changing their culture but

I slowly began to realize that the Ecuadorian way isn't the wrong way but one of many ways.

instead to learn. I have learned to cook, improved my Spanish, gained patience, and now I know that a clock is not the only marker of time.

I have come to terms with what is. Journaling about the things I am grateful for has been a great relief from all the ugly that might arise

during my day.

Everyone will always want rice during lunch and dinner. I do not, but neither is right or wrong—it just is. This change in mentality is simple, yet difficult to accomplish, and has had the single biggest impact on my happiness and success during service. So remember: simply breathe, listen, and do. Whichever way you decide, there are always several paths available.

Today, I am thankful for having a functioning fan, a neighbor who gives me fruit, and students in my English Club who give me hope for the future of education in Ecuador.

*Author teaches English in the library with a focus group of students who needs some extra learning support in a small group setting.*



# LOL: *Lots of Love*

In honor of Valentine's Day, or *el Dia de Amor y Amistad* (The Day of Love and Friendship) as it's known in Ecuador, we asked volunteers what they love about the country and their service.

## I love...

...getting on a bus and seeing all the beauty that is Ecuador. Its nature and beach are always breathtaking.

-Yajaira Hernandez, TEFL

...empanadas!

-Salvador Hernandez, Y&F

...the love that my host family displays for each other and extends to me. It gives me hope on the worst days that indeed 'the arc of the universe is long, but it bends toward justice.'

-Rae Sterrett, TEFL

...almuerzos. No joke.

-Chris Owen, NRC

...how hard it can be. All of the struggles and challenges and flat-out failures make the successes burn so much brighter.

-Danielle Gradisher, TEFL

...when my host mom calls me 'hijo.'

-Audie Cerrato, Y&F

...pan de yuca.

-Jane Wakefield, CH

...the humble feeling I get from building relationships with my counterparts, students, and other host country nationals. It all makes Ecuador feel like home and not my country of service.

- Robert G. Heale, TEFL

# Parting Shot



*Zackery Hersh*

“If you think you're too small to have an impact,  
try going to bed with a mosquito.”  
— Anita Roddick