

A Day in the Life

The lives of Peace Corps volunteers in Ecuador are incredibly diverse—from living in the mountains, Amazon, or coast to working in small communities or large cities in one of four different Peace Corps programs. These images of Ecuador and Peace Corps volunteers throughout the country shed some light on that diversity.



(A) A sunset over the Amazon (Photo courtesy of PCV Krystal Krejcik)

(B) Pole climbing in Santa Lucia (Photo courtesy of PCV Bonnie Jean) (C) Krystal Krejcik (D) Staircase in Tena



(A) The Pacific Ocean and Galapagos Islands (B) One of Ecuador's many volcanoes, overshadowing rose shelters (C) PCV Shay Priester with children at Kuyay Raymi in Attilo (D) A minga (E) PCV Melissa Gonzalez at work

A Welcoming Party

Chris Crawford

The day after my arrival to San Miguel de Ibarra, two traditional events of the city took place: *el Día de la Bandera* (Flag Day) and *el Día de la Fundación de Ibarra* (Ibarra's Founding Day).

I attended these events with my host-family. It was almost as if these two events welcomed me to the city.

El Dia de la Bandera was the first big event that I participated in at my school, the Unidad Educativa de Ibarra. I walked in and decorations in red, blue, and yellow surrounded me, along with crowds of people pushing and shoving to see the event. I felt overwhelmed at first to see so many people in my

high school at once.

During the ceremony, the *rectora* (principal) and *vicerectora* (vice principal) spoke about the history of the flag. The flag colors are sky blue, blood red, and golden yellow.

However, at the Unidad Educativa de Ibarra *el Dia de la Bandera* is not only a day to remember the flag. On this day, the vice principal names the school valedictorian, or the *abanderada/o* (liter-

ally translated, the one endowed with the flag). At my school, the students with the highest grades carry the flags at the ceremony.

Participating in this event made me feel like an important member of my school community.

It surprised me that people in Ibarra put such importance on Flag Day, much more than I've seen for the U.S.'s own Flag Day.



(A) Cheerleaders from Ibarra's local high school (B) The National Police's band forming a heart shape

The second event of the day was the Founding Day Parade which celebrated 408 years since the founding of Ibarra.

People from Ibarra spent all day finishing floats, putting on costumes, and practicing dance moves.

This event also attracted people to the recently remodeled Parque Céntrica Bulevar (or Parque de la Ciudad Blanca, depending on who you ask) which is the biggest park in Ibarra. People arrived hours before the start of the parade to get good seats.

The Ibarra police, students from the Universidad Norte de Ibarra, a *bailoterapia* group, el Parlamento Andino, and other groups marched in the parade.

Everyone participated in the parade, even people from different ethnic backgrounds who typically live in separate communities such as indigenous people, foreigners, and Afro-Ecuadorians.

Afro-Ecuadorians danced *la bomba* while balancing green glass bottles on their heads.

Some participants wore traditional indigenous and African outfits.



Members of the Cultural Sindamanoy Foundation during the parade

Others wore pre-Columbian outfits, all dancing in unison.

People wearing golden Incan outfits celebrated not only current cultural heritages but pre-Colombian ones as well.

The dances also varied from indigenous to more modern dances choreographed to songs like Enrique Iglesias's "Bailando."

In addition to the *pregón* (parade that begins the festivities), I could also hear street vendors selling street food like *ceviche*.

I felt empowered seeing all of the diversity that Ibarra had to offer. When I first moved to Ibarra, its diversity was one of the city's characteristics that made me feel most at home.

On Saturday, September 27th, the national police added their own event to the Founding Day celebration at the *Estadio Olímpico de Ibarra* (Olympic Stadium).

Officers from all over the country came to perform motorcycle stunts, jump from helicopters as *paracaidistas*, and lead K-9 unit dogs through fire hoops in the *show de canes* (dog show).

These events not only taught me about the history of Ecuador, but also the diversity of Ibarra, the place I will call home for the next few months.

Now I feel more excited than ever to continue with my Peace Corps service.

Home: Person, Place, or Thing?

Nicolina Trifunovski

Being away from home is not easy. We leave our comfort zones. We leave our family and friends. We leave our lives behind. In my case, I left my fiancé back in New York as well.

Having a long-distance relationship has special challenges. It is definitely a stress, and only the strong need apply.

I cannot say that my situation is harder than others', which may involve an in-country relationship or none at all, but I can say

that it is a different kind of hard.

To make this work, Carmelo and I have to put effort into it every day. Every morning, I look forward to his text message in which I can always count on being told how much I am loved, missed, and how I am his everything. I respond by saying the same to him.

In such a short message, he even makes me laugh with a different cute, and sometimes very strange, pet name every

day. Most nights, we chat through Skype.

I always look forward to these bits of communication because they are the closest I can get to him while being so far away. But I prepared for the moments we wouldn't be able to communicate before I left for Ecuador.

I stole—with his permission—one of his sweaters, which I sometimes sleep in. It is the only “hug” I am able to get until I can wrap his arms around me once again.

Communication has been a surprising challenge at times. Carmelo and I are entirely dependent upon using our words to effectively make our points.

I had never realized how important body language and other forms of communication can be until I was left with just words on a computer screen.

Video chats are not a cure-all either. My web camera will never fully capture my body language. I am grateful for even that



Carmelo and Nicolina on a vacation cruise last March

much, though. Not every Peace Corps Volunteer has the luxury of internet here, but I do. Having easy access to Internet makes the world a little bit smaller.

Being so far away, my fiancé and I have to be able to trust one another. We have to believe in each other's fidelity.

Machismo is not just a problem for the single ladies here in Ecuador; it affects us "taken" ones, too.

When I explain that I have someone and that he is back in New York, they disregard my response, as if to say that being in any relationship where the significant other is not nearby is not worthy of respect. I imagine the same may be possible for Carmelo as well.

We have to trust each other to not cheat on the other, especially when there may be other people on the outside trying to selfishly break that bond.

The love I have for my fiancé helps to keep me in check so that I do not falter but also so that I can believe in him to not falter either. It is a mutual trust entrenched in the love that we have for each other and helps get us through.



Carmelo and Nicolina during a lighter moment of their vacation

No one said a long-distance relationship would be easy. In fact, I fought myself for a while before even getting to Ecuador about whether I should delve into a serious relationship with Carmelo.

Having previously been in serious relationships while miles away from my significant other, I knew that the heartache of embarking on a serious long-distance relationship was nothing to take lightly.

The intellectual side of me, which said that it was stupid to get involved right before leaving for another country, fought viciously with my gut instincts, which told me that this was the man I am meant to be with and should not—could not—be turned away. Neither side would let me rest.

For a long while, I spent my time in agony,

feeling torn in two. But I realized, based on past experiences, that my gut instincts are *always* right. So I chose to take on this battle I said I would never take on again.

Throughout my Peace Corps experience, I've struggled with the simple fact that being away from my fiancé is difficult and being away from my home is difficult.

But then I came to realize that I don't fully consider New York my home. I wasn't even sure I considered the U.S. my home. In the midst of my searching, I realized that for me, home is not a place but a person.

While I'm grateful to be here in Ecuador fulfilling my dream of serving as a Peace Corps Volunteer, I also can't wait to run back to Carmelo, because wherever he is, I am home.

Ecuator-Thanksgiving

Thanksgiving is one of those uniquely North American holidays. Full of family, friends, food and football, it can be a hard holiday to share abroad. But this is exactly what Peace Corps volunteers did throughout Ecuador in November—from Vilcabamba and Cuenca to Riobamba, Bahia and beyond—while embodying PC's Second Goal.



(A) Volunteers from several omnibuses, along with ex-pats and Ecuadorians, celebrate in Vilcabamba

(B) PCV Erin Fischer poses with freshly made Thanksgiving dishes (B) A Riobamba feast (C) Final preparations



(A) Volunteers on the coast relax after their meal (B) Green bean casserole, pumpkin pie, and sweet potatoes (C) Volunteers enjoying their dishes in Vilcabamba (D) A Cuenca Thanksgiving (E) Riobamba PCVs with a teacher

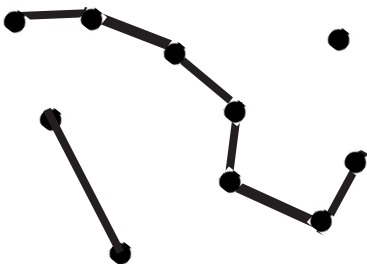
Mentor Stars

Anonymous

A constellation of mentors and role models fills the night sky of my life. Its brilliant light can pierce the densest mental cloud cover. This light is empathy, the ability to share someone else's feelings. Empathy allows us to see other people as fellow human beings and strongly disposes us to treat them as we ought to.

Two of my constellation's brightest stars are my mother and my youngest sister, Debbie. I respect and admire them because the trials and setbacks they faced did not harden their hearts nor break their spirits; in fact, most days, they woke feeling they were among the luckiest people on Earth.

At 16, my mother followed the tradition among Irish youth to emigrate in



search of opportunity. I knew my mom as tireless and seemingly ever-cheerful as she raised eight children, managed accounts

in the early years of my father's business, and

kept a beautiful home.

Despite her many family responsibilities, she always found time to lend a hand to anyone who called on her, and she encouraged her children to do the same. I recall collecting nickels from neighbors for the American Cancer Society and helping Mom pack boxes of clothes we had outgrown to send to Ireland. She never succumbed to the prejudices held by many of her generation.

In the early 1980s, as head cashier of her brother's restaurant, many patrons, some of whom were gay and estranged from their families, adopted the smiling woman at the register as their own "mom."

Sadly, I was late in divining that my mother's

generosity, integrity, and empathy were rooted in the challenges, disappointments, and betrayals that were as much a part of her

life as her joys and accomplishments.

Though my mother died

16 years ago, her magical light shines brightly in her youngest child, Debbie. Debbie leaves a trail of stardust and goodwill in her wake.

Debbie and I were partners in her restaurant and catering business for five years. Watching her walk through the restaurant dining room was mesmerizing and, at times, exasperating.

Unlike me, her pragmatic and often impatient oldest sister, Debbie knew intuitively which customer needed a smile, a hug, an encouraging word, a sympathetic ear, or just a dollop of fresh whipped cream on the most delicious brownie ever. She fed the homeless and donated her "food made with love" to

“Empathy is really important... Only when our clever brain and our human heart work together in harmony can we achieve our true potential.”

~ Jane Goodall

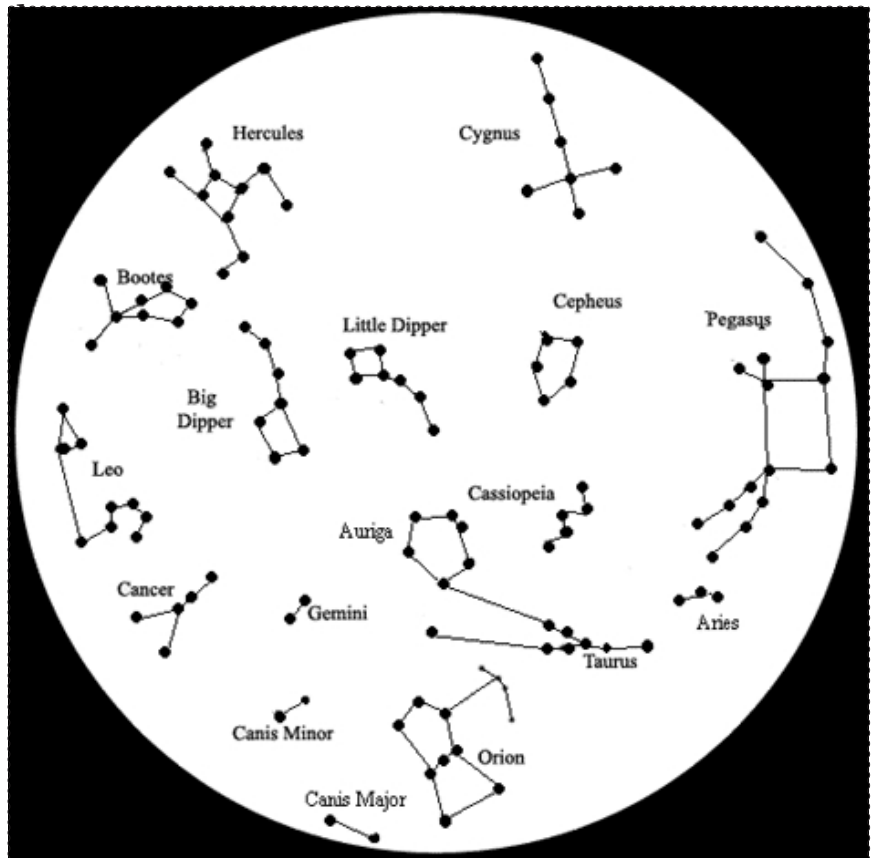
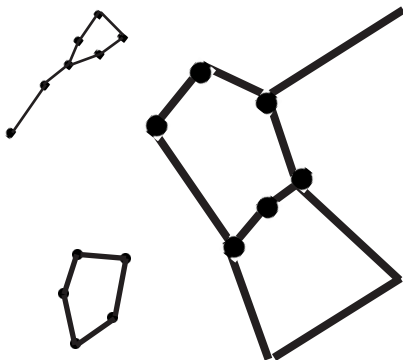
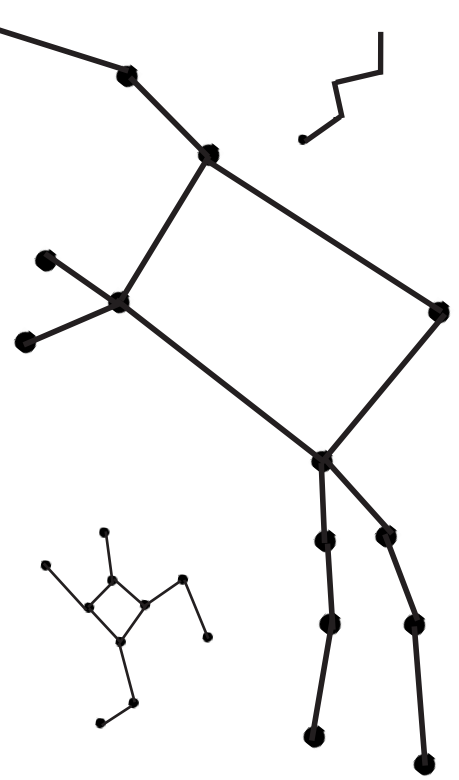
worthy causes even when she struggled early on to support her two young children. Though retired and now sailing the world with her husband, she is still the go-to person for countless friends and family in need of counsel and love.

During the past eight years, I have volunteered in Honduras, Nicaragua, and now Ecuador; I also studied for a second master degree, returning to college after more than 35 years. I have lived in large cities in Latin America and in rural rustbelt towns in the U.S.; shared meals with Spanish-speaking host families and much younger college students; and witnessed extremes of wealth and power, poverty and despair. Though I try to keep my mind and heart open, I often find myself struggling to summon the empathy that came so naturally to my mom and

sister.

These remarkable women developed empathy while experiencing some of life's greatest delights and deepest sorrows. With age and experience, I concur with primatologist Jane Goodall's observation that the capacity for empathy sets us apart from other animals.

Perhaps if I contemplate the constellation in my night sky deeply and often, I will one day practice empathy as instinctively as my mentor stars



The constellations of the northern hemisphere's night sky

Happily Home

Dani Gradisher

I visited my mom for the first week of November to celebrate her 60th birthday. I told my coworkers, “I’m the only child of a single mother, she’d kill me if I didn’t.” While this was mostly true (she really would have killed me), I also just really wanted to go home. I missed my dogs and Mexican food and not having to choose between pressure and heat in the shower. Because of all this, I spent nearly 24 hours on buses and in airports to make it to my hometown of San Diego.

I was greeted at the airport by my mom, my fiancé, and two happy labs who lay all over me, covering me in yellow fur. Sitting in my mom’s oversized truck, driving on San Diego’s over-sized roads, and buying an over-sized Styrofoam cup of Mexican *horchata* made me sigh with happiness.

The entire week made me sigh with happiness. I played with my dogs, saw my neighbors and friends and family, and ate so

much I gained five pounds. For a moment there, mid-week, I was afraid that I genuinely wouldn’t want to go back to Ecuador.

Strangely, the night that was the most fun, the night we celebrated my mom’s big 6-0, made me realize that not only would I return to my Ecuadorian mountain town, but I would also do so happily.

Before my 22 hours of “holy mother, how am I not home yet,” my English teachers had put together a party for me. They had given me a gift to present



(A) Teacher Patricia Verdesoto with the gift (B) Dani’s mom receiving gift

to my mother and fed me still-warm brownies with melting ice cream. They told me how much they appreciate me and my help and my mother for “loaning me to them.”

During my mom’s party nearly a week later, the birthday “girl” opened her presents one by one. She got to the bag that held my teachers’ gift and pulled out an autumn-colored tablecloth. My teachers had spent time and money (precious things for teachers) to buy a beautiful gift for a woman they’d never met. And they’d done it because they know me.

The sight of precisely woven oranges and yellows and reds reminded me why I was in Peace Corps in the first place: to *conocer* rather than *saber*.

For those unfamiliar with the difference, “conocer” means to know deeply on an intellectual or emotional level while “saber” is a more superficial, factual kind of knowing, more of a “know of/how.”

Before moving to Ecuador, the country and its people were merely pieces of information I carried around in my brain. But now I’ve spent hours upon hours with my teachers,

planning and teaching and talking about food. I know their families and their children and their opinions on *cuy* (guinea pig). After living and working with the same teachers for months on end, they are now people I carry in my heart.

After my mom’s birthday party, I started looking forward to the things I’d begun to miss about my city of Latacunga: my teachers, my Ecuadorian

family, *pan llorón* (bread filled with what tastes like honey), and even the skinny little sidewalks that make the 13-minute walk to school an adventure.

At the end of the week, I hugged everyone goodbye at the airport (dogs included!). Even though I was not looking forward to another 22 hours of planes, trains, and automobiles, the only weight on my shoulders was an over-loaded backpack.



(A) Dani’s fiancé, aunt, and mom, with Dani (B) Horse cupcake “cake”

Parting Shot



Eric Aiken overlooks the Pacific Ocean at sunset while visiting the Galapagos Islands (Photo Courtesy of Emily Aiken)

“ Why do you go away? So that you can come back.
So that you can see the place you came from with new eyes
and extra colors. And the people there see you differently,
too. Coming back to where you started is not the same as
never leaving. ”

~ Terry Pratchett

Suggestions or submissions? Email us at elclimamagazine@gmail.com. Thank you!