



El Clima

The Official Peace Corps Ecuador Volunteer Magazine

The OMNI Issue

Top: Omni 114 at Mid Service Conference;
Bottom: Omni 113 being silly at their Close of Service conference. Congrats on finishing your service 113ers!



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Editor's Note

The Omnibus Issue is one of my favorites because we get to hear about the importance of service from a diverse group of volunteers, each at varying points in their journey. It also demonstrates the diversity of experience for each program, omnibus, region, and individual, so that our readers can begin to paint a picture of this beautiful country we call home. In Peace Corps, no two experiences are the same; likewise, every volunteer has an individual journey. We learn from each other in our failures and our successes.

In some ways, the numbered Omni system reminds me of the grades in high school or college. You have the Peace Corps Volunteer Leaders, like Erin Fischer and Chris Owen, who are your super seniors. They know all of the staff, cool sites to visit, and are there to help the newbies navigate this new world and culture. The real seniors, Omni 113, are those volunteers that are in the process of completing their two years. These are the volunteers that had time to welcome and train the incoming omnibus. They are hard at work finishing projects in their communities and enjoying the few precious months they have together before they return to the States. The juniors, Omni 114, have been in site for a year and have finally made headway in starting their projects. Peace Corps Ecuador staff will often tell trainees that it takes a year in site to really get a project going, and although we refuse to believe it, it is most absolutely true. The sophomores, Omni 115, have finished their community diagnostic and are in the throes of making grand plans for their community— some of which will come to fruition and some of which will fail majestically. Nevertheless, these sophomores have realistic hopes of making an impact. Finally, there are the freshmen, or the new trainees, who are simply learning what it means to be a volunteer, how to be safe, how to navigate their program goals, and how to enjoy the beauty of this wonderful country. Unlike a typical high school, our upperclassman usually enjoy sharing their knowledge and country with trainees— they want the best possible volunteer to replace them and continue the work they've started.

Last year, we were unable to welcome our new freshman class, Omni 116, due to the horrible earthquake that hit the Northern provinces of Manabí and Esmeraldas. Instead, we welcome our newest trainees, Omni 117, and wish you all the very best. This issue is comprised of advice, stories, and revelations from each "class" of the current Omnis. For all other readers, we hope you enjoy a sneak peak into the inner workings of each unique omnibus that represents the United States in Ecuador.

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

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Ask Anita

Anything

Beloved Anita,

I have been working with Peace Corps Ecuador for a number of years. We often discuss and compare Omnibuses to each other. But as a group we can never come to a decision on which is the best Omnibus to ever serve in Ecuador. We need your outsider opinion to solve this problem once and for all.

Signed,

Melanie "I'm-a-Millennial-and-want-to-be-the-best" Jones, Omni 105

To Misinformed Millennial,

I'm glad to answer your question. Undisputedly, the best Omnibus to have ever exist or that ever will is undoubtedly Omni 112.

Signed,

Not-biased-at-all-Anita

Left: Omni 112 (Aunt Anita's self proclaimed 'best' omnibus) at their swearing in ceremony; Right: Omni 112 at their COS conference in their matching shirts



Aunt Anita,

I know you're not really my Aunt but I just feel so close to you because of all the insightful advice you have given me. I have been talking to a few Peace Corps volunteers around the world and have learned something very unique and interesting about the volunteers serving in Ecuador. I am curious as to why you call your groups "omnibus" and what that means exactly. Thanks in advance for your amazing answer.

*Love,
Your "Niece"*

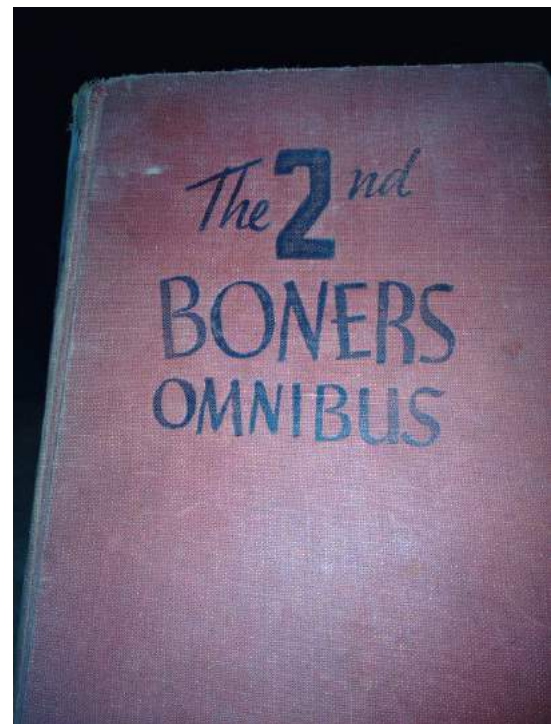
Dearest Niece,

Tell your mother I said hello, I really should stay in better contact, it's such a tragic thing to have siblings grow apart. I'd love to help you with your inquiry. Omnibus has many definitions; the most basic definition being a tour bus. I have heard a theory that an early group of Peace Corps Volunteers in Ecuador once got on a "Omni-bus" together and the name just stuck. Sounds like a cover story to a bigger mystery.

Let's break this down, shall we? Omni on its own is defined as all ways or all places. And a bus, is that horrible cramped, overcrowded source of transportation PCVs are forced to use in Ecuador. SO, calling us an Omnibus is the government's way of mocking our forced ways of transportation and condemning us to a perpetual use of uncomfortable passage back and forth across the country. Or I guess it could have been taken from the definition of "bring multiple objects together into an aggregate source". I'll let you decide, which sounds more plausible.

Also, kind of related, but oh too delightful to leave out, is this gem I found. A book called 2nd Boners Omnibus which was written in 1938. It is a 357 page compilation of one liners; "jokes" they called them. Like "How would you keep wine from turning to vinegar? Drink it." and "Rear-admirals are very low types of admirals." (I think that's a butt joke.) So, maybe this is where the name came from. I like it Boner Omnibus 114, has a good ring to it, and is quite fitting.

With love,
Aunt Anita



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Our newest Omni..Omnibus 117 at their staging in Miami

Welcome
Freshman
Omnibus
117

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Words_{of} Wisdom

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Chris Owen and Erin Fischer (Omnibus 111)

Welcome Omnibus 117!

And congratulations—you all are now officially part of the Peace Corps Ecuador family. Like any family, older siblings have both the responsibility and the privilege to pass down their accumulated wisdom to those who come after them. The following words of wisdom come from Omnibus 111, who began their service in January of 2014 and will have their final two volunteers complete their service this March and April. As a Peace Corps volunteer, you will see and experience this country in a way that few ever will. You will create a life here, replete with friends, family, favorite restaurants, meaningful work, and more. In a word, Ecuador will soon become home. You are now part of a story that has preceded you for 50 years and, because of your presence and work here, will hopefully endure for 50 years more. Thank you for carrying the Peace Corps Ecuador legacy forward. We wish you the very best and hope that these Peace Corps Ecuador “words of wisdom” serve you well.

Sincerely,
Omnibus 111



Left: Family weekend at the beach in San Pablo, Santa Elena; Middle: Group trip to the REAL Equator because we are legit like that; Right: 111 being 111 our swear in ceremony..shout out to the last (and best) NRC group

What would be your top recommendation to current or future Peace Corps Ecuador volunteers?

The unknown is part of the adventure. Don't stress about trying to figure out everything before you get to country. Everyone's experience is different so just enjoy the ride and take things as they come.

Form relationships with people in your community. It will make your service one thousand times better.

The more you put into the experience, the more you get out of it, so give it your all!

Try all the food at least once.

Every day is different. Every day has its high and low. Do not be hard on yourself and the people you are working with. It will take a while for them to get used to you and you to them for there to be trust.

Don't sweat the petty things and don't pet the sweaty things. As they say, lo que pasa, pasa (whatever happens, happens); just go with the flow. Things won't work out, and that's okay.

Enjoy and explore the country of Ecuador as much as you can. There is a ton of diversity within that small area even if the bus rides seem to last forever.

Don't be disappointed if it seems like things aren't getting done in your eyes. You often have an impact in the smallest ways without realizing it.

What is the one thing that you really miss about Ecuador now that you're back in the States?

Chocolate!

Affordable fruits and vegetables.

Spending time with my host family.

Work-life flexibility and balance.

The food—la comida Manabita es la major (the food in the Province of Manabi is the best), especially ceviche de mani from Jipijapa!

The general lack of urgency.

I miss the music! Never did I imagine I would, but I do - blaring away on the bus, in the streets, even when there are six different songs blasting within six feet of each other along the malecón. Every now and then I will catch a familiar song here that I heard over and over in Ecuador, and it makes me so home-away-from-homesick.

Any other words of wisdom you'd like to share?

Explore the country to the fullest (the Amazon is the coolest).

You're going to get sick: keep Pepto nearby with a pair of spare underwear.

Take it as it comes. I've had some of my highest highs and also had some of my lowest lows here in Ecuador. It's important to remember this is difficult - no one can pretend otherwise! You're a rockstar just for being here. Take it day by day, and you'll be amazed at the end of your two years. That and eat Riobamba's cevichochos. They will change your life.

Don't expect life back home to be the same as when you left. People can change and move in different directions in two years. You especially will have changed.

Don't give up! It's usually after moments when you feel like giving up that some of your biggest breakthroughs happen.

Breathe. It's all going to be okay.

My *Departing* Experience

Pamela Delarosa

My name is Pamela Delarosa and I am from Atlanta, Georgia and am 25 years old. I will be joining Peace Corp's Ecuador team as a TEFL teacher. First off, I must say that I am extremely excited for this new journey. Currently I am still at home not so patiently awaiting my departure. My group is scheduled to arrive for staging in Miami on January 22, 2017 and then onwards to Quito on January 25.

Although I have not met anyone yet from my Omnibus, we do have a Facebook group where we've all been chatting and getting to know one another online. I've been chatting plenty with Nathan Axdorff and Eneida Spaho who are just as excited as I am about our new adventure. We've mostly been talking about what kind of luggage we're bringing and some items that we can't live without and are definitely packing, no matter how ridiculous it may seem later down the road. The packing process overall hasn't been too difficult. But I'm seriously wondering if I really need to take apple cider vinegar or coconut oil with me. Honestly, those two items are some of my staples and I would be sad if I went without them (yes, it's that serious!).

I hear Ecuador is one of the best countries for Peace Corps service, and this excites me even more! Apparently, what makes it so great is the varied geography and cultures, which has made it even more difficult to decide where I would like to be placed for my potential site. I know that not everyone will be able to get their first choices but if I had it my way, knowing what I know about Ecuador and the Peace Corps, I would love to be placed in Cuenca. I hear it's a beautiful city (the historic city is a UNESCO World Heritage Site) with lots to do and going there is like stepping back in time. If not Cuenca, any city in the Sierra region would be ideal for me because I've always wanted to live in the mountains and would love to experience the cooler climate year-round. I'm most looking forward to seeing the Galapagos Islands and hope to even go scuba diving once or twice throughout my service. From the few people that I've talked to in my Omni I know that most of us would like to be placed in the Sierra region, although a few others have told me that the coastal area sounds more attractive to them.

Overall, I would say that we're all ready to depart. I can't wait to meet the people that will be joining me and to see how our experiences differ from one another. I'm definitely looking forward to finishing training, so I can begin my two years of work at site. I hear that Pre-Service Training is sometimes the hardest part of service, and I would be a liar if I told you I wasn't at least a bit nervous. But we've made it this far, I have no doubt we can survive this. So here's to you Omni 117 and the next 27 months!!!



115 on their first day of staging in Miami

The
Sophomores
Omnibus
115

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Not Your Grandfather's Peace Corps

Tori Jackson

We still aren't too sure what 'omnibus' means, but 115 signifies that we are the 115th group of Peace Corps volunteers to live 27 months serving in Ecuador. As Teaching English as a Foreign Language (TEFL) volunteers, our main objectives are to increase the capacity of local high school teachers to teach English while representing American culture and taking back understanding of Ecuadorian culture to the United States. Upon hearing the name 'Peace Corps,' many envision riding horseback into a village of shoeless people staring at your foreign face with confusion and awe. This was,

in fact, the reality for Moritz Thomsen, author of *Living Poor: A Peace Corps Chronicle*. Old enough to be my grandfather, he tells the story of his late-1960's Peace Corps service as one of reading by candlelight, three-day bus journeys, and constructing chicken coops. It meant moving to a culture completely unlike that of the American one he came from and sacrificing all familiarity with the prospective reward of making a change.

Fifty years later, serendipitously close in location, Moritz and my service differ just as much as they resemble each other. In Ecuador, the standard of living has drastically increased. A shift from rural to urban site placements, especially in the TEFL program, shapes the experience of many volunteers to have access to a lifestyle not necessarily worlds apart from his or her lifestyle in the States. The sacrifices aren't the same because many modern demands of development have surpassed subsistence into growth. Trust me, we are still 'living poor,' but even the concept of poor is vastly different from the reality of the volunteers who paved the way for us. My 'poor' is sacrificing a few coffees a month to afford a gym membership to keep off the extra bolón (delicious fried plantain ball) weight. His 'poor' was losing 30 pounds from receiving one fried egg a day for dinner.

Volunteers of Peace Corps yesteryear were confronted with isolation in a black and white way. With books and letters often

5 Santo Domingo volunteers bring Thanksgiving and all of its deliciousness to Ecuador





Left: I brought a box of over 30 letters, each written by an unmarked friend or family member with instructions to "Open when..." and an occasion written below. When FaceTime isn't enough, the letters make me feel closer to home; Middle Left: My excellent team of counterparts. Our English Area is known as "The Witchas," for enchanting with our English; Middle Right: Spanish class with a view during Pre-Service Training in the capital, Quito. Right: Are you a Peace Corps Volunteer looking for other ways to save money? I cut hair for free! Smile guaranteed, symmetrical haircut not included.

being the only connection to their lives back home, those of Moritz's time had the option to immerse themselves in their community or face total solitude. Now, isolation has entered a grey space. As a volunteer in Ecuador's 4th-largest city, shutting myself in my two-bedroom apartment with the fastest Wi-Fi I've ever had can easily take away the pangs of homesickness. Nevertheless, regular connectivity comes at a price. With constant bombardment of news back home, FOMO (Fear of Missing Out) can overshadow being present in the experience. While growth comes from being outside of one's comfort zone, it can be hard to consistently choose the unknown, when familiarity is a smartphone touch away. Netflix, Spotify, and FaceTime become your new host family if you're not careful. It's not impossible for a volunteer to establish a life in his or her site; however, there are infinitely more distractions than existed before.

In a general sense, I would say that Peace Corps is less severe today than it was at its inception, as is modern-day life compared to a half-century ago. Even so,

we live in a more advanced world that presents unique challenges that shouldn't be trivialized. The volunteer must persist in order to have the experience they envisioned from the Kennedy-era posters while also discovering fulfillment in the new normal.

Generations later we still crave the life-altering, world-bettering experience of giving omnibuses have laid before us.

Ultimately, Peace Corps still exists because there is still work to be done. Although Hollywood's influence is bigger than ever, it is still difficult for Ecuadorians to believe that a living, breathing American is anything other than a blond-haired, light-eyed, hamburger-eating gringo (person from the US).

Representation as diverse Americans still matters. As TEFL volunteers, rather than building chicken coops, we prepare Ecuadorian teachers and students to be competitive on the world stage by learning English skills: development that matches the need. So, although for some the definitions of service and sacrifice have changed, the reward and reason to serve have not. Generations later we still crave the life-altering, world-bettering experience of giving that previous omnibuses have laid before us. It's not our grandfather's Peace Corps, but it's one he would be proud of.



114 on their first day of staging in Miami

The
Juniors
Omnibus
114

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children would run up to me asking when the next camp would be, so it seemed only necessary to plan another week-long camp in October.

At this point, Omnibus 112 had finished their two years; fortunately, the volunteers in my Omnibus had taken the skills and knowledge from them during the last camp in order to replicate and expand on new lessons for the second Camp of Champions. Even better, I was able to invite Peace Corps Volunteer Leaders to lead sessions on recycling, gardening, and drug prevention. The English classes were also stronger because Omni 115 were now official volunteers, and they worked together with Omni 113 so that each group of kids had their own English teacher.

I have learned that each Omnibus is a diverse group of people and that when we look outside of our own Omnibus, we can create something that will make a broader impact on our communities. Selfishly, I have learned just as much as the kids that participate in the camp. I now feel comfortable giving a condom demonstration, starting a community garden, and teaching basic English, things that prior to the camps I had no experience in.

These camps have helped me share Peace Corps Goal 2 (To help promote a better understanding of Americans on the part of the peoples served) with my community in a manner that I could not do individually. As a light-eyed, blonde-haired female, I fit many of the stereotypes Ecuadorians have come to expect of U.S. citizens. By inviting over 20 different volunteers to come to my site, my community now sees the diversity we have in the United States. The children discovered that we all speak different, look different, and are from different states. They met a fellow volunteer who could write in Japanese, another that was born in Mexico, and so much more because that is the beauty of Peace Corps Ecuador. We have different skills, experiences, and ideas that, when brought together, can open a whole new world to everyone around us and continue the work started over fifty years ago.

To check out an amazing video of the last camp, made by my fellow PCV Mario Marchioni, hit the link <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=AuUFhxEbtwl>



Top: PCV Betsie from Omni 112 teaching bailoterapia; Second: PCV Justin from Omni 114 and Bryanna from Omni112 with their group doing a nutrition charla; Third: PCV Shay from Omni 112 working on the world map mural at the first camp; Fourth: PCV Spenser from Omni 112 teaching break dancing; Bottom: PCVs with campers at the second Youth Skills day mini camp

Learning from the Best



Aned Ladino

While I was getting ready to start my English class on Wednesday, one of the refugees told me: “Profe, usted es bien versatil” (Teacher, you are very versatile).

I thought about it and realized that as Youth and Family Volunteer, I have the opportunity to adapt to different activities. As a member of Omnibus 114, it all started during training last May, throughout which my fellow volunteers and I learned about culture, language, and technical skills. During this time, we were responsible for our first group of kids, completed our first lessons, had an open house, and still had time for an ice cream party.

In my site of Ibarra, I work with HIAS, the Hebrew Immigrant Aid Society, and I am able to adjust to different tasks thanks to some of the skills that I have learned from my fellow 114 volunteers throughout my service. During the past months, my focus has been working with refugee kids.

Every Tuesday afternoon I meet with a group of kids from the ages of 5 to 12 to do different activities. We mainly do crafts with recycled materials. I got this idea after Courtney Evans, another Youth and Family Peace Corps Volunteer (Y&F PCV), used recycling materials for her

open house during training. She used plastic bottles to teach the kids bowling. The children painted the bottles and used them as bowling pins. I replicated this activity with my group of kids, and they loved the idea of making something they were able to use in a game. We also read a short story once a month, an idea I got during mid-service when my fellow Y&F PCV Devin Olmack mentioned that one of her activities involved reading short stories after-school.



On Wednesday, I put my teacher hat on to teach English to a group of refugees who may go live in the United States through the United Nation Refugee Agency program. I did not have much experience about teaching, but during reconnect, we had a session lead by Y&F PCV Melia Cerrato about classroom management. I

have been able to use these techniques not only with my English club, but also with my kids and youth groups.

Every Thursday, I have a youth group where we focus on activities about self-esteem, sports, nutrition, and sexual education. During Pre-service training, I co-led a group of students with a community health volunteer and saw a charla (lesson) on nutrition. I have been able to replicate it with my youth group, and we even made a nutritious guacamole.

I am fortunate enough to share my Peace Corps experience with my husband, Justin Stonecypher. He is a community health volunteer; therefore, has helped me with my sexual education lessons on puberty, STI's, HIV, and AIDS. He has provided PowerPoint and resources to teaching my youth group about healthy lifestyles. Also during Pre-service Training, we had a day where we got to play different sports, and I played

Ultimate Frisbee for the first time. After seeing Y&F PCV Jon VanTreeck's passion for the sport, I decided to try it with my youth group during our sport's day. I am not sure if we played by the rules, but they were introduced to a new fun sport like I was in training.

I have become a versatile volunteer, but I didn't do it alone. Throughout my service, I have learned different skills from my fellow 114 volunteers, and it has helped me serve my community better.



Right: Omni 114 showing some birthday love to PCV Mario Marchioni;
Bottom: Omni 114 after Mid Service Conference



The Definition of *Omní*



Nicholas Nguyen

“What does omnibus mean, anyway?”

That is the question we all too often ask coming into Peace Corps Ecuador as new baby trainees, wide-eyed and curious. In Peace Corps Ecuador we are dubbed a numbered omnibus for each entering group of volunteers: even numbers for the Youth and Family programs and odd numbers for the TEFL programs. But many wonder...

“Who even uses that word?”

“Is it some sort of weird, government terminology?”

“Fancy Latin lingo to make us feel fancy?”

Well, my friends, I have come to you to finally provide an answer.

As an adjective, omnibus is defined by Webster’s dictionary to mean “relating to many things at once.” Not stemming far from its etymological origin, the literal meaning of Latin word omnibus is “for all” as it is the dative plural of omnis (“all”).

However, the etymology of omnibus is not lost to its usage in describing incoming Peace Corps trainee groups.

The common usage of this word began in 1820s France as a part of the name for a new type of public transport that was open to everyone – the *voiture omnibus*, literally meaning a “carriage for everyone.” The word was soon adopted by England, only to be abbreviated in English as simply *bus* – a term we are of course very familiar with in both English and Spanish. As public transit, the most noticeable characteristic of the bus was that it gathered all types of diverse people who were brought together by a similar purpose – to travel in the same direction. Likewise, us volunteers are a diverse group of people from all walks of life, brought together to travel in the same direction, to the same country, under the same design, and united by a common endeavor. Those of us that make up my omnibus could not be more different from each other, coming in from all parts of the United States with nothing but strong ideals and passionate hearts shared between us. A Peace Corps omnibus, in a way, really is “for all–” not only for those who join, but for those whom we serve as well. We volunteers come into Peace Corps to help and serve all those we can regardless of their history or status in society. So then, perhaps, it is not so strange for us to be labeled by the term omnibus.

Still, conceivably more important than any dictionary definition is how we, volunteers of Peace Corps Ecuador, define the word omnibus. As language is a malleable beast, it arguably only matters how we take up the word: how we perceive it, use it, and feel about it. Therefore, what is the definition of an omnibus according to the volunteers of Peace Corps Ecuador? Well, that might depend on the volunteer you ask. But if you were to ask me, an omnibus means a group of motivated, intelligent, and kind-hearted individuals coming together to better the world under the wing of Peace Corps. They are the love, support, and inspiration that carry you

through your service as a volunteer: a new type of family that commiserates and struggles with you while on the same challenging journey, but refuses to give up on both you and the mission. The omnibus is your partner in glory or misfortune, in health or pain. An omnibus is an elemental part of the volunteer experience that connects you to something greater than yourself. But maybe that's just me. So I ask you, dear fellow Peace Corps Ecuador volunteer, what does omnibus mean to you?

¡Que viva 114! (Long live 114!)



Previous page: End of OMNI 114 Midservice - "Who knows when we'll be able to all be together again, so let's get weirrrrd" said somebody probably. Photo cred: Maria Jose; Bottom Left: Just OMNI 114 being cute as all get out, as per usual. We're way too good at it I know. Photo cred: Dalton Martin; Bottom Right: Start of OMNI 114 Midservice - The latest photo of the entire omnibus together. It's all smiles baby. Photo cred: Maria Jose



Omni 113 during training

The *Seniors* Omni 113

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Finishing the *World Map* Project:

Experiences and Lessons Learned

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Robert Heale

As I stood painting in the boiling sun, with a group of my students, people would often inquire about the meaning behind the mapping project. Essentially asking, "Why dedicate the time and effort to painting a map of the world at a high school in the middle of Ecuador?" I would often respond by explaining my purpose as a Peace Corps Volunteer in promoting cultural understanding and then explain to them that the project is an educational initiative for the students of the school that helps them to learn and engage more with the world in which they live.

On a personal note, this mapping project has been something I have always wanted to do because of the communal work it involves between the volunteer and his or her community, which in my case is the school where I work. It's also a project that helps students understand the scope of how big our world is and to look beyond their country's own borders, which is something I've been passionate about since being in Ecuador. Since becoming a volunteer, I've always wanted to share my knowledge and experiences with students, counterparts, and others in my community



to broaden their perspectives, to inspire them, and to let them know that a world exists out there beyond what they are accustomed to seeing everyday.

The actual process of doing this project has been a journey in itself. Earlier this year, I presented the idea to an art teacher in my school, and she thought it would be an interesting undertaking for the both of us to work on. We didn't actually get started, however, until around September, after me and one of my best students went class to class for three days collecting donations and pitching the world map project to the rest of the school. After we collected enough money to buy the materials needed, made our purchase of the necessary colors, and borrowed a projector and extension cords from my coworkers to trace the map during the night, we began painting the following weekend.

At first, the project was slow to get off the ground since I only had the help of four students, who I called *el equipo* (the team). We began by only working on Saturdays, but after about a month, we started to work through the week, which is when things picked up.

The sense of urgency between myself and my students honestly couldn't have been any more different. After almost completing service in Ecuador, I admit I still like to get things done a bit quicker than at the pace things operate here. Some days I would have plans drawn out in advance for where I would like to be with the project.

Unfortunately, this didn't yield results any faster, and as such, has been yet another eye opener. I've humbly learned to not think of this initiative on selfish terms but rather to coordinate with everybody involved, even if it's on their own time, which makes it a true learning experience!

Completing the mapping project has meant

a lot to me. There have been countless days in which I thought I would never contribute anything meaningful to my service or anyone here. It feels great to know that I can leave something with the school that is going to benefit them and serve as a reminder of the Hip Hop volunteer from the United States who came and served for two years. I will never forget this experience and everybody involved, without whom the project would not have been possible. It's been a humbling few months; I now look forward to building closer relations with my students as we finish the school year.

Previous page: The finished world map; Top and Bottom: PCV Robert and his students working on the world map project



Baking: Taking time to Connect

Rae Sterrett

Peace Corps Volunteers are known for talking about food. We're in a foreign land, making a volunteer's salary, which means that eating in top-notch restaurants is a luxury that we generally forego. Sometimes the food we eat causes digestive upset; other times it's the source of a great story or a cultural moment between friends. Food is a necessity, but figuring out how to get it, prepare it, consume it, and enjoy it are all avenues that get reimagined when you're living in a new place.

My omnibus is no different from your average group of volunteers, in that we all love to eat good food. What was surprising to me was how adept so many people in our omnibus are at preparing it. My contribution to our omnibus has been my love of baking. While I adore teaching, it can be frustrating to not see results, and even more frustrating to not know what results you should be aiming for. That's one of the reasons why I love baking. There is always a recipe to follow. It's much more clear-cut, and for me the regimented aspects help me to destress at the end of the day. The fact that people love to eat what I make is an additional bonus! I've baked for my colleagues at school, for my host family and of course, for my fellow Peace Corps Volunteers.

Without a doubt, the most popular recipe that I have made during my time here in Ecuador has been lemon bars. My host family, like many Ecuadorians, do not like recipes that are too sweet, so cakes weren't a hit. Pumpkin pie was a little more popular, and triple berry pie also

went over well. However, the balance between the sweet crust and the tangy filling of the lemon bars proved to be the winner. I began making this recipe when I was in graduate school in California, and I have adapted it for baking in Ecuador at a high altitude. The original recipe is here (http://www.treats-sf.com/2011/02/meyer-lemon-bars_13.html). However, if you happen to find yourself in Quito with a 9x9 pan, the adapted recipe is below.

Why are my lemon bars important? First of all, they enabled me to connect with my fellow Volunteers. I am a member of SpeQtrum, a support group within Peace Corps Ecuador for members of the LGBTQ+ community and their allies, and I always tried to bring a plate of lemon bars to the meetings. They were well-received every time and generally served as a pick-me-up. I also used my lemon bars effectively among the Volunteers as a form of reward. We get many emails from Peace Corps staff, and it can get wearisome to respond to all of them, although we often intellectually understand how necessary that can be. To increase participation in our Annual Living Allowance survey, I contacted all of my Peace Corps friends on Facebook and begged them to complete the survey in exchange for lemon bars at the next meeting. Needless to say, the response rate was a lot higher that year, and I wound up baking six different pans of lemon bars to hold up my end of the bargain!

It's with my Ecuadorian family and colleagues, though, that I truly believe making the lemon bars has had the most impact. My host family understands that I don't make much money as a volunteer, which meant that they appreciated the fact that I took the time to bake for them even more. If I knew a birthday was coming up in the family, I always tried to make lemon bars as my gift to the birthday person. I baked lemon bars for special events within my family, like Christmas or graduation celebrations, and my family greatly appreciated that I contributed what I could to those events. For my colleagues at the school, the lemon bars were, if anything, even more valued. I took the responsibility of organizing some professional training workshops for my teachers, but due to scheduling issues all of the training workshops had to take place over the lunch hours. While I let my colleagues know that they were more than welcome to bring their own food to eat during my workshops, I also brought lemon bars to say thank you to them for being willing to give up their time to attend. My colleagues were so grateful for the extra treats, and when you have to give a presentation on different kinds of standardized tests, any amount of sugar to stay awake certainly helps!

I'm so grateful for the opportunity to serve here in Ecuador, and I'm even more delighted that my love of baking translated so well into this culture. My colleagues, fellow Peace Corps Volunteers, and family have all grown to love my lemon bars, and my hope is that they will remember the sweet memories we made sharing them as well.

Ingredients for Crust:

8 Tbsp of butter
1 ¼ cup flour
½ cup powdered sugar if available, if not granulated sugar works

Preparation: Heat the butter in a microwave or in a pot on the stove until just melted. Add the sugar in and blend. Add flour by the handful and keep mixing until it forms a dough. Depending on the type of flour you have, you may need to add more until the dough sticks together.

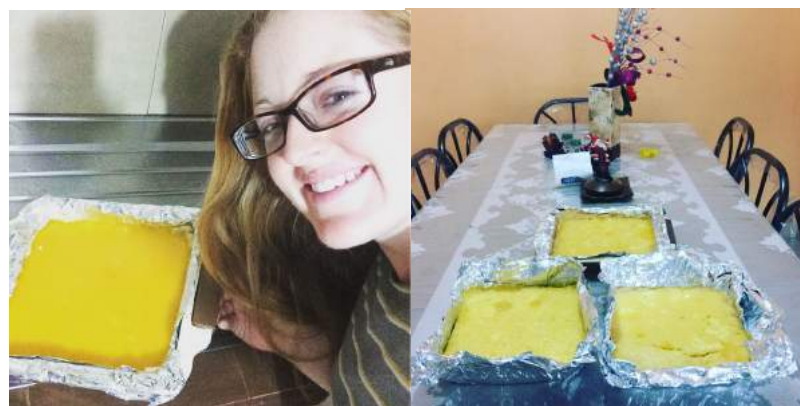
Next take your 9x9 pan and coat the bottom and sides with butter or a non-stick spray. For easier clean-up, if you have aluminum foil you can line the pan with that and grease the foil. Press the dough into the pan and bake for 10 minutes at 185 degrees Celsius. Remove and allow to cool while you make the filling.

Ingredients for Filling:

7 egg yolks, 2 whole eggs
2/3 cup granulated sugar
Juice from 5 large lemons
4 Tbsp butter
3 Tbsp crema de leche

Preparation: Using a large pot, whisk the egg yolks and whole eggs together. Toss in the lemon juice and sugar, mixing thoroughly. Add the butter and heat over low-medium heat, stirring constantly, until the butter is melted and the liquid is uniform. Remove from the heat and add the crema de leche, stirring until the mixture is consistent. Pour the filling into the crust and bake for 10 minutes at 185 degrees. It will be runny in the middle, so let it set for 45 minutes to an hour before cutting. Dust with powdered sugar if you have it, or cut strawberries for the top and dust them with sugar.

Rae with her lemon bars on Christmas



The *Obsolete* Love Form: *Reflections* from a 113er

Tori Sims

Before leaving for Peace Corps, I felt a debilitating sense of disconnect: disconnect from an abrupt post-college transition, disconnect from my rapidly changing family and dissipation of the safe harbor it once was, disconnect from the overly-animated people I served dinner to at night and the challenging students I worked with during the day... disconnect from my purpose. I have always feared becoming just another cog in the wheel of the great American machine—and yet I found myself beaten down, working long hours, and feeling lonely in rooms full of people. I no longer noticed the color of things. I robotically moved from point A to B each day and hoped that Peace Corps would be the vehicle to show me a different way.

And show me it did. Life in Ecuador is painfully slower than life in the States, and simple tasks are often made into events. I brought my brisk hustle from the sidewalks of Chicago all the way here just to find myself annoyed by slow-moving herds of

families and friends who seemed too self-absorbed to remove their arms from each other and allow the faster walker the right-of-way. Getting to school was a forty-five-minute bus ride

and a twenty-minute walk. Trying to plan classes in the sole teacher lounge was interrupted by parents asking questions, a lady trying to sell stuff, students retrieving materials, and the unwelcome greeting received by each. And then classes would be unexpectedly cancelled. I

bought a beer, and social etiquette forced me to pass it around a circle of people before taking a second sip. Going to run an errand turned into picking up a friend, stopping by the hair salon, and eating lunch with a cousin named Fernando. Sleep was made difficult when I was too sick to move or had to fight scorpions in my house. I felt stared at all the time. Time passed.

I began to hold myself accountable for my reactions, to frame things positively or examine why they stressed me out in

“I lived in a treehouse in a cloud forest for a week during one of our English camps, and a colleague’s husband told us: “After seeing the work you guys do first hand, I can honestly say that I’m so proud that you represent both me and the United States in Ecuador.””

the first place. I got called “vecina” (neighbor) by the sassy store lady for the first of many times. Three of my quietest students came to our city-wide English Club each week without fail. After one class, my co-teacher and I just looked at each other and laughed, surprised by how smoothly our lesson went. I received enthusiastic greetings from students, and the littlest ones ran up to hug me. I talked to the janitor about local plants that alleviate pain from sunburn and bought fruit from the local market. I lived in a treehouse in a cloud forest for a week during one of our English camps, and a colleague’s husband told us: “After seeing the work you guys do first hand, I can honestly say that I’m so proud that you represent both me and the United States in Ecuador.”

Through it all, Peace Corps is also relentless. The battles we face are



Top Right: PCVs and students celebrating last day of English Club in Ambato; Bottom Right: Celebrating 25th birthday with Ecuadorian friends; Top Left: PCV Tori Sims leading an activity at Global Citizens Camp in Ambato; Bottom Left: PCVs during break at Camp Mindo



nuanced and emotionally- draining. The work we do forces us to systematically deconstruct all of our prior expectations and beliefs time and time again so that we might rebuild them and learn to truly integrate. My Peace Corps service is a lot like the hill I climb each day. On the good days, all I see is beauty: it’s in the flowers, the burn in my muscles, and the lazy dogs. On the bad days, each step is excruciating: the hill exists in spite of me. I have climbed the hill hundreds of times and continue to do so each day. I feel that I have found success. I see the colors. I walk slowly. I have been forced to partake in messy and inconvenient person to person interactions—the obsolete love form. I feel that I am loved—and I’m bringing the crazy mess of color home with me.

All you need is Love...

What I love about Ecuador is the natural beauty of my "home" province, Loja, where once a year a forest of yellow trees bloom for only a week.

What I love even more than that is the adventurous spirit of Peace Corps friends who agree to pack a bag, take a very long bus ride, and camp overnight just to see it.

-Kata Grosman (Omni 114)

I love how complete strangers have grown to call me family. I love quick day trips to the beach. I love waking up every day knowing I'm doing something good. I love when I enter my work and I am chased down by a wild mob of kids screaming "Senorita Boni."

-Bonnie Jean (Omni 112)

"I love mango season."

-Maryam Beintema
(Omni 114)

"I love how I am always learning something new about my fellow omnibus members and that they are always teaching me...As well as their English students."

-Zack Hersh (Omni 113)

"I love the trees in Ecuador."

-Carolyn Fledermaus (Omni 115)

One thing I love about Ecuador is my host family and our commitment of watching Caso Cerrado (a soap opera) every night for at least an hour."

-Liz Gosselin (Omni 114)

What do you Love about Ecuador?

"I love my dog."
-Courtney Evans
(Omni 114)

"I love that my Omni is so united, like a big family that always make time to get together."

-Brooke Hammer (Omni 115)

"Lapingachos
Chorizo and egg
Sunny taters, so
dazzling
Mountains ambrosia"
-Emily Boyer (Omni 115)

"I love the llamas."
-Hannah Harper
(Omni 114)

"I love the endless amounts of fruit found here."

AND

I love my Omni, because at the end of the day, no matter where we are...Our Omni is family to the core. We started as 38 and we'll end that way."

-Brittany Rojas (Omni 115)

"I love that the guys dance sin verguenza (without embarrassment)."

-Courtney Heptig (Omni 110)

"I love that transportation is so cheap and accessible."

-Tony Romero (Omni 112)

...Love is all you need



Parting Shot:

Shout out to the 113ers who have worked so hard on El Clima during their service. Good luck in your future endeavors!

Above: PCV Robert Jameison playing guitar for his students during a school play; Bottom Right: PCV Tori Sims at the Women's day celebration at her school; Bottom Left: PCV Rae Sterrett and her student, Brittany

