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WorldTeach
Ecuador
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During the summer of 2009, I spent ten weeks in Ecuador through WorldTeach. The organization handled many of the logistics including flights, orientation, site placements, living accommodations (usually host families), and additional support. The WorldTeach office has two full-time directors in Quito, Ecuador, as well as support from the national office in the United States.

For the first ten days I stayed with the other twenty-two summer volunteers in a hotel in Quito for orientation. Orientation consisted of lots of TEFL (Teaching English as a Foreign Language) seminars, safety and health sessions, Spanish classes, cultural orientations, some sight-seeing, plenty of time to explore Quito and get to know Ecuador, and bonding time with the other volunteers. The directors brought in many speakers for all of the sessions, so it was nice to get various perspectives on different topics we would be facing. By the end of orientation, I felt very comfortable being in Ecuador. I felt anxious, yet prepared, even though I was not sure what to expect from the rest of the summer.

After orientation, we all split up to go to our own sites for the remainder of the summer. Earlier we had filled out an interest form including preferences on regional location, environment, teaching, and host family, and we were all assigned a placement based on that. Some sites had two or three volunteers stationed together (usually living in separate homes, but sometimes together), while others had just one volunteer. We were scattered well throughout the varying landscapes of Ecuador with site placements ranging from the coast to the mountains to the rainforest, and from urban Quito to very rural areas of the country. Volunteers worked with various populations including young children, university students, and adults in community

classes. Because of this diversity, each volunteer had a very rewarding, yet very unique experience.

I was placed in a rural village called Cuellaje in the INTAG valley. There was another volunteer at my site; another in La Loma, a smaller community about a half-hour walk away; and another in the village of Peñaherrera, which was about a two-hour walk away. The INTAG valley is north of Quito in the cloud forests and is comprised of about thirty communities. For public transportation, there is one bus per day that travels from Cuellaje to Otavalo at 6:30am, and then leaves to return to Cuellaje at 1:00 pm, stopping at the villages along the way. Cuellaje has about 400 people in it and is about twelve square blocks. It has many small family-owned stores, a couple family-owned restaurants, *cabinas* to make phone calls, a school for first through ninth graders, a church, and a few people with very unreliable Internet access.

I lived with a host family in Cuellaje and taught at a school named Escuela Jose Luis Moreno. I was assigned to teach 1st-4th grade everyday, while my site partner taught 5th-7th grade everyday and 8th-10th grade once a week. The classes were forty-five minutes long and part of their normal school day during the year.

Unfortunately, I was not very prepared to teach at the beginning of my experience. WorldTeach had been under the impression that I would be teaching high school students, so that was the message conveyed to me during orientation. I had listened to the sessions and prepared materials with my high-school classes in mind. Once I started teaching, I found out that teaching 5-8 year olds (many of whom cannot read or write) is very different than teaching high school students.

Furthermore, the school environment did not make teaching classes any easier. The students, while excited to learn English, were not always well behaved, and with thirty students

in a class, I had some difficulty with classroom management. The structure of the school was very different from that of a school in the United States. Classes were cancelled by the principal or teachers, half of my class would be out rehearsing a dance, and I almost never found out about these changes until class started (or was supposed to start).

Despite these challenges, I was able to teach some English to my students. During our mid-service conference, I looked back on the teaching challenges I had faced up until that point and came up with a new strategy. I talked with the directors and other volunteers, and searched the Internet for advice on how to teach a foreign language to large groups of young students. I bought resources during mid-service while I was in a larger city, and made a curriculum for the rest of the summer utilizing activities such as songs, games, and interactive activities. I am proud to say that by the end of the summer my students knew parts of the body, colors, numbers, animals, the alphabet, simple commands (stand up, sit down, touch your head, dance, etc.), and could answer and ask questions such as “How are you?” “What is your name?” and “How old are you?”. Perhaps more importantly, I believe that my students enjoyed learning English and I saw their motivation increase each day both inside and outside of class.

The most memorable moments for me were outside of class when I saw my students using English. They identified animals that were on the street, greeted me by saying, “How are you?” or told me to “sit down” if I was standing. I think that their ability to use English outside of class and to feel confident enough to practice in front of me shows that they definitely learned some English in just a few weeks.

Even though I believe the students benefited from the English classes that I taught, I know that I benefited a great deal more. I was immersed in a new culture, a new language, and a school environment very different from anything I had experienced before. I had to adapt to this

new environment, communicate with teachers in another language, get used to cancelled classes, and teach English to large groups of young students. I learned how to adapt, be more flexible, and not get bent out of shape if something does not go the way I plan. Patience was an extremely useful skill this summer, and it allowed me to learn so much more that will benefit me in the future.