

Funding Request!

Esmeraldas Youth Skills Workshops

The *Fundacion de Progreso Social Manos Unidas* is requesting funds for two upcoming workshops on handicrafts and light industrial arts (artisan and welding skills) in the coastal town of Esmeraldas. The request has come from PCV Tyler Warmack ('06 –'08) who is currently working with Manos Unidas. In their words, “the aim of the workshops realistically addresses the basic needs of the community's youth, and equips them with skills that enable them to earn money, secure jobs, and learn how to manage their lives healthily and successfully.”

Manos Unidas was founded to combat the challenges that youth face growing up and living in marginalized barrios of Esmeraldas. They see unemployment as one of the largest contributors to social problems such as lack of access to quality education, teenage pregnancy, the spread of HIV/AIDS, poor nutrition, low self-esteem, violence, and drugs. After years of work in the social sector, the foundation has come to the realization that productivity is a key aspect to development; and Manos Unidas is now developing an alternative for the youth of Esmeraldas creating a venue to educate them socially and economically.

With your support, Manos Unidas can more effectively run their training programs and help more youth to finance their education and effectively support themselves and their families. To date, about one half of the requested \$986 has been raised. Please donate today at: www.friendsofecuador.org.



Photos courtesy of PCV Tyler Warmack ('06 –'08)

An RPCV Returns Home

I returned to the United States at the beginning of summer 2002. Two years and three months before, I'd gotten on a plane to South America, terrified as the others in the seats around me. There were thirty of us trainees in Omnibus 83, and we were heading to Ecuador to teach agriculture, resource conservation, and animal production.

We'd heard rumors. How we'd get kicked out if we didn't learn the language, the myriad and insidious tropical diseases, and the dangers of living in a Third World economy: theft, assault, and worse. A volunteer had disappeared in Bolivia, and not even the American embassy could track him down.

I read the handbook twice: the lists of recommended items to pack, important cultural points, how-tos for everything from banking to mailing letters. In country, we sat in classrooms for three months to learn everything again.

But what Peace Corps didn't prepare us for was the return home.

Another volunteer, Emily, returned to the U.S. a month and a half before I did. I called her from my home in Oregon to Pennsylvania, half-way across the country, and we talked.

“Lawn ornaments!” Emily burst out laughing. “That was my first impression of America. Those little gnomes people leave in their yards. No one steals them!”
“Cars!” I added. “I took my mom's car to the coffee shop, and I felt like I had to park my car in front of the window so I could see it. Then I kept looking over every so often to make sure it was okay. We always did that in Quito.”

In Washington, D.C., just off the plane, I'd mistaken a hotel bellhop, standing alert in his gray uniform outside the glass doors, for an armed guard. I ate at McDonald's and thought sadly about my favorite armed guard, who used to pace outside of the McDonald's in Quito in the morning before it opened. He'd sit sometimes on the bench beside the plastic life-sized clown Ronald, and one time I caught him with an arm around Ronald, embracing in comfortable companionship.

RPCV Amy Waterman ('00 –'02)



It was reverse culture shock, the Peace Corps nurses told us. No need to worry; the world would turn right side-up as we settled in and wrapped our old culture like a transparent sheet around us. But the things I thought in those first few weeks scared me, because this world America was no longer familiar to me; it was as foreign as Mars, a red, harsh, warlike planet so distant from the green-and-blue swirls of the Mitad del Mundo, the underdeveloped Center of the World.

I was luckier than most. Oregon's agricultural community depends on migrant labor, and the region where I lived had *panaderías* and *taquerías* in every town. I found friends to speak Spanish with and even helped a local Mexican baker promote his business. I gave talks about Ecuador to my aunt's women's group and a friend's second-grade class. Still, it wasn't enough. I missed being a volunteer, I missed speaking Spanish and, most of all, I missed knowing my identity. I wasn't the white *gringa* here; I was just one more average American amid a sea of Americans.

After a year, I left the U.S. I applied for a masters in writing program at the University of Wales-Aberystwyth. I'd fallen in love with Aberystwyth when I was working as a shepherdess on Welsh farms after college and always wanted desperately to return. The program would help give me a second career, since a knee injury in Ecuador had cut short my farming hopes. Plus, the writing program would help me do something with the 300-page manuscript sitting on my computer. "Two Years in Ecuador, by Amy Waterman." It was a less-than-brilliant title for a behemoth of a first draft, but it was accurate. Two years of scribbling in the evenings when there was nothing to do in my village but make dinner and watch television until bedtime. The Peace Corps creates writers from sheer boredom.

There were no Mexicans in Wales. My friends from the international student body were English, Chinese, Greek ... not even a single Spaniard among them. I missed speaking Spanish even more, and I found that my experiences were so different from those of the typical 19-year-old British university student that classroom discussions left me dumbfounded by the irrelevance of it all. I was older, and it showed.

I satisfied my desire for volunteer work by becoming a note-taker for students with special needs. It was the perfect move: one student who needed notes was in first-year Spanish. I sat through an entire year of Spanish taught by a Welsh professor teaching pure Castellano.

As the following summer wore into fall, I was finishing my thesis and wondering what to do next. I knew one thing: I couldn't go back to the U.S. It felt like part of my past, a link to my childhood rather than my future.

Goodbye Solitude... Hello text messaging!

Upon the entry of the most recent omnibus (Omnibus 95: 2006–2008), Peace Corps-Ecuador began implementing its newest safety and security procedure – the official issuing of cell phones to its PCVs. Each cell phone has a \$10/month plan paid for by PC-Ecuador, however PCVs can opt to increase that balance out of their own budget.

According to Ecuador's PTO Dana Platin, this is just a sign of the times, since many PC offices around the world are now adopting this precautionary measure to ensure that PCVs can readily contact their headquarters, and be contacted, in the event of an emergency.

An Australian friend's visit was just the clue I needed. His fantastic accent, sense of humor, and stories of Australian life reminded me how much I loved that part of the world. Although I'd already seen Australia, I'd yet to visit its neighbor. After he left, I logged onto the internet and did a search for "work abroad new zealand." Eureka. As long as I left before I turned 30 the following year, I could obtain a New Zealand Young Person's Working Visa for one year.

With that decision, my life came full circle. I returned to Ecuador just six months ago. When my plane from Auckland via Santiago touched down in Quito, my ex-boyfriend Vinicio was there with a huge smile and a hug to greet me. He took me to a dingy hostel, which nevertheless had hot water and a private bathroom for \$10/night. We wandered the streets until late in the night talking. It was dirtier than I remembered. I stumbled over broken sidewalks, coughed as buses belched black smoke, and held tightly to Vinicio as rowdy young men passed us in the dark.

I remembered how it felt to be wrenched from this country when my service ended and how, back then, it was the United States that seemed like a foreign country to me. Now, everything here was so strange. How could I have forgotten all this: the *controladores* shouting from the bus doors, the wrinkled indigenous women jerking cups in our faces, the brown faces that once were my family.

Memories broke like fragments of a melting iceberg. The Tortuga Verde where we'd drunk British beer and played pool. The *discotecas*: Papillion, Señor Frog's... Each new corner we turned brought an old memory. The burger stand that used to sell vegetarian burgers until 2 in the morning now served *comida típica*, so Vinicio and I ended

up making our way back to the Mariscal where we had nachos and margaritas at Red Hot Chili Peppers and filled each other in on our lives.

I was in Quito to obtain a document I needed to complete my New Zealand residency application. I'd found home at last in that wonderfully green, wild country. I had a good job with an internet design company that created online learning packages to sell to Americans. One of our products was Rocket Spanish (www.RocketSpanish.com), an innovative interactive language learning system that I'd created along with a Chilean colleague, based on how we were taught Spanish in the Peace Corps.

Vinicio told me that he was still struggling to finish his degree and make any money at all. He'd tried to open a restaurant, which had gone bust. He'd worked for the Pilsener brewery driving truck. He'd done the *recorrida* for the children who went to his sister's nursery school. He'd lost what little he

earned on ventures that never turned out, like taking tourists on horseback rides on Ilalo, which looked promising until someone stole the saddles.

As I looked at him and held his hand across the table,

seeing in his eyes the light of love that would never dim, no matter how far our lives grew apart, I felt such a deep sadness. I could travel anywhere. I could live anywhere in the world. He felt as imprisoned here as I had felt in the U.S., but he couldn't leave. What developed country would issue a visa to a young single man with no assets and no job?

I left Ecuador for the last time with my precious document in hand. This time, I boarded the plane with no regrets. As hard as it had been to leave my life as a volunteer, I had created new opportunities for myself. I had gone on to love again, though I had kept those I loved here close to my heart. I had kept their language alive on my tongue and taught it to others. My life would always honor Ecuador, not as a Peace Corps Volunteer, but as an RPCV who wore her memories with pride.



Amy Waterman standing high above Quito during her visit to Ecuador in 2006.

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For more information visit: <http://www.friendsofecuador.org>