The Ecuador Experience
March 7 – 16, 2013

Defined by relationships

In our 10th experience in Ecuador we continued our long-enduring partnership with Cameron Graham and her mission work through Youth World, based in Quito, Ecuador. This year we focused on relational ministry by reconnecting with Pastor Ramiro at Remanso de Amor and Pastor Josúe in Atacames. Our days were filled with the laughter of children, warm hugs, delicious food, intentional conversations and (mostly) sunshine and good weather. Our nightly group debriefs encouraged students to intentionally reflect on their time in Ecuador and how this relates to their life journeys as a whole.

Excerpt from anonymous survey asking: “What did you gain from this experience?”

“I gained a lot of perspective on ministry, Anthropology, cultural prejudices, my spirituality and faith, how I experience things opposed to others, and how I want to live my life after Sewanee.”
Going to Ecuador was something I did on a complete whim. Being a freshman, I thought there was no chance I would ever be chosen, considering the amount of upperclassman that applied severely outnumbered the freshman. Yet I had faith and sure enough I was given the opportunity to go on the Ecuador experience.

One of my most vivid memories of Ecuador was being at one ministry that was located in a marshy, farm area. We arrived early one morning to set up for our children's program and we got things started right away. We first had a song for the children, followed by a skit with a moral lesson embedded in it, which was followed by crafts, face painting and playing soccer outside.

During the songs, there were three little girls who showed up. They were all sisters and they were six, four, and two years old. When I first saw them from the corner of my eye, I could tell there was a special bond between them all. The oldest was in the middle, holding her two sisters by the hands guiding them over to our circle. These girls were a shy little bunch, but I wanted to melt their shyness away for a bit, and get them to express themselves to us. As we lead each activity, the three girls began to open up more and more and then finally when I was blowing bubbles for the girls to pop them, was when the girls expressed their pure happiness. Their beaming smiles when they would blow a huge bubble, or when they giggled because the bubble popped on the ground, indicated to me they were so happy and excited to be there in that moment. They enjoyed chasing the bubbles around, waiting for them to pop, and even trying to make their own bubbles. Although it was only a little thing like bubbles, I had never seen such pure joy about the simplest thing.

These girls taught me that I can create joy from something so simple as bubbles. They reminded me that the simple things in life are some of the most joyous ones, and that the little things can make all the difference in someone's day.

Janie Spilman, C'16

I had never been on a mission trip before partaking on the Ecuador experience. My initial impulse for signing up was a deep-seeded desire to explore Latin America and the available opportunity presented to me through the outreach office. I came into the commitment with an open mind and no expectations, which turned out to be excellent tools for an enriching experience.

Weekly meetings beforehand with the group served well to prep me somewhat for the work we would be doing while in Ecuador, but nothing could have prepared me for our actual time spent at the mission churches in Quito and Atacames. The first day on site really set the tone for the rest of my experience. We unloaded our bus with trunks full of balls and crafts and bellies full of butterflies. I laughed at myself for being so nervous to entertain these children; I found their energy and confidence more intimidating than confronting a group of my peers. What if they didn't like me and thought I was dumb for speaking broken Spanish? What if they would think our crafts were lame? Much to my grateful surprise, the children were overflowing with love and patience. I felt nothing but positive energy from them and appreciation for our presence, even if our Spanish was mas o menos and our crafts were elementary. I loved every minute with the various groups of children and adults from the churches we visited and am so grateful to have experienced firsthand that love is a universal language.

Eileen Schaeffer, C'13

“We are made for togetherness, we are made for family, for fellowship, to exist in a tender network of interdependence” – Desmond Tutu
A part of Ecuador that will always hold a place in my heart was having the opportunity to visit 8 Ecuadorian houses. The images that I have brought back with me are very impressive, but the realizations I gained from this experience I consider vastly more significant. Another Sewanee student and I shadowed a native Ecuadorian whose daily job was visiting 20 families, each once a week, checking up on how they were caring for the children, giving their children coloring sheets, asking if and how they were utilizing the local church, asking them what resources they had, asking what kind of help they needed, and praying with them. The houses we visited ranged anywhere between an apartment building with television, refrigerator, wood floors, and separate rooms to a gated in area with mud as flooring, metal scrap piles, a tub of dirty water used as a bathtub, and a small section with a scrap metal roof functioned as a bedroom. There were houses that hoarded papers and books, houses that used cardboard as insulation against their cinder block walls, houses that had pet chickens roaming in and out of the house, houses that had roofs made from scrap metal, and houses that had a crib for their child. Although each was very different from the last, all of the houses had at least one child, with some of the mothers being as young as 15 when they gave birth.

As we left the beautiful Ecuadorian streets and landscapes to enter these houses, I felt like an intruder, a North American who didn't even know their language entering their houses and lifestyles. I wanted so badly to understand their lifestyles and help them. From this experience, I learned that it is hard to fully give if each person does not experience some kind of vulnerability. I struggled with my evasion of their space, but I realized that without this, I would not understand how they wanted and needed to be helped. Without this kind of relationship formed, I would be ignorantly inflicting my culture on theirs, believing that the only way to better their lives would be making the changes I, as a North American, saw were wrong in their culture. For example, had I not listened to these Ecuadorians, I would have wanted to give them food that they may not have had a place to cook, stress equal responsibilities of the father and mother in raising children when their culture places the responsibility solely on the mother, give them a vacuum cleaner to clean up after their chicken when they really needed food, or clean out their hoards of paper that may be some of their only belongings. Their needs were so different from my natural instincts to help them. One mother asked for food for her toddler so that she wouldn't always have to breast feed, one mother missed the vaccines for her children, and one mother had a child that was very malnourished and not potty trained at the age of 5. By gaining these thoughts and insights as to how to approach outreach work, I realized as I have reentered my life in Sewanee how this concept applies to my daily life. I have reminded myself on a deeper level that I cannot really know what is going on in someone’s life, be quick to judge someone, or be worried of how I am offending someone when I intend to help until I really understand their lives. It is not until both I and the other person experience some kind of vulnerability that we can both benefit from each other.

Elise Landreaux, C'15

“I learned that I'm on the right path. I know what I want to do with my life and going to Ecuador confirmed that. I learned how good I am at finding what people are good at and what they love... I think my place in Sewanee is not a place. I have pieces of me all over campus and Ecuador showed me how much I love every part if Sewanee that I'm involved with.”

“After these trip experiences, we try to allow for a continued dialogue among participants... Our hope is that whatever someone touched, smelled, saw, or felt will not be shut off, but will flow like living water from an endless well and dictate a life-long commitment to serving others.”

Dixon Myers
Coordinator of Outreach Ministries
When I walked into the Iglesia de San Francisco, I was taken away by the detail and immense amount of gold before me. I was walking into the most intricately beautiful church I had ever seen. I began walking around and made eye contact with an Ecuadorian woman. She began talking and I turned around and realized she was trying to talk to me. She was speaking in rapid Spanish, but I understood pieces. She started telling me about St. Anthony who was in a painting right beside us. I was impressed that she wanted to share her stories with a foreigner like me.

As I kept listening, I realized she was telling me about a story from her past. One day she was hungry and had no money for food. She went to the church to take a nap and fell asleep on the pew next to St. Anthony. When she woke up, there was a Bible beneath her resting head. She thought it was a miracle because she did not have the money for a Bible.

I was in awe of this woman. She knew I was a foreigner and could not speak much Spanish. Regardless, she wanted to share her faith journey with me. This woman only had her stories and her Bible, but felt compelled to share those two things with me. What a great way to live: to always be open to sharing your story and faith with those you encounter.

_Austen Zoutewelle, C'15_

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**Pictures**

**Front Page** - Top: Ecuador Group with Ecuador Hosts Jose Luis, Pastor Ramiro, and Amanda Voth; Bottom: Elise Landreaux

**Page 2** - Left: John Cochran; Center: Eileen Schaeffer; Right: Mary Ottley

**Page 3** - Top: Mary Kate McAlister & Mary Ottley; Bottom: Janie Spilman

**This Page** - Top: Austen Zoutewelle; Bottom: Ecuador Group with Cameron Graham and Baby Graham.

**Ecuador Participants**

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