

A Beautiful World

-Sara B. Groton '04

*B*efore last summer, I barely knew a thing about Ecuador. I didn't know that Colombia and Peru are its bordering countries, that Quito, the capital, has an altitude of 9,252 feet, or that hundreds of indigenous tribes exist throughout the country, each with its own culture, traditions, and struggles. I didn't realize that while I was there, I would be living and working in the backyard of the Amazon, and I never thought I was capable of rebuilding a house and helping an entire community. Most of all, I never dreamed this same community would give back so much more to me.

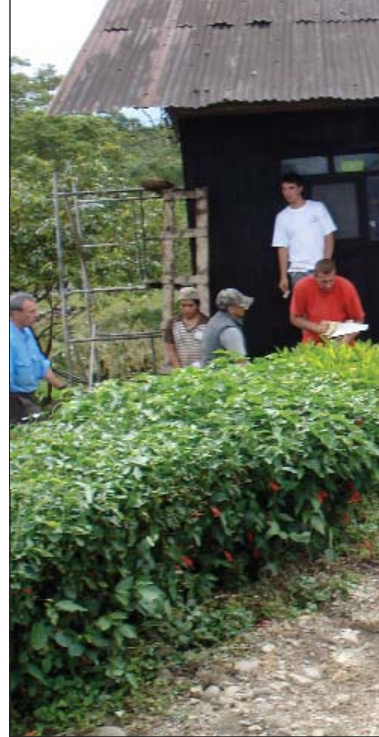
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On August 9th, I embarked on a journey to Ecuador with a mission group from various Episcopal churches from southeastern Connecticut, including Calvary Church in Stonington. We were going to Ecuador to rebuild a broken down house in the impoverished town of Puyo. Pine Point alumni Sewell '04 and Frances Robinson '05, my dad John Groton '73 and I, along with The Reverend Mark Robinson (Rector of Calvary Church and father of Sewell and Frances) made up five of the sixteen people on the trip. Our group met for the first time outside of a coach bus in Gales Ferry at 4:30 the morning of our departure, anxious and excited about what would come next, not knowing what to expect.

After a long day of travel and a bit of getting to know each other, we made it to Quito and greeted Chris, our leader for the next 10 days. Chris lives in Ecuador with his wife and two daughters, who also accompanied us throughout our trip. His oldest daughter, Claire, a quirky, energetic six-year-old, quickly became part of the gang and rarely left Sewell, Frances, or my side. She and her doll, "French Toast French," entertained us for the entire six-hour drive from Quito to Puyo.

The morning after we arrived in Puyo, we attended a service in the Episcopal Church run by Father Andres, the minister who had helped us put the trip together. We walked in from the pouring rain and sat down on the benches, looking around at the men, women, and many children surrounding us, wondering what their stories were and what their lives were like. They looked right back at us with the same curiosity. Most of them knew that we had come to help them rebuild, but it was the first time many of them had met anyone from outside of Puyo, especially anyone from the United States. The service was entirely in Spanish, making it a little difficult to understand, but I felt more connected to God and the people around me than I ever had. During one of the hymns, the boy I was sitting next to turned to me with a huge smile and said, "Me llamo Pablo," and took my hand. The more I looked around the church, the more smiles and welcoming eyes I saw.



The cooking and laundry station



One of the best parts of the experience? Working side by side with my dad.

That afternoon we went over to Father Andres' house for lunch. It was their normal chaos: children running around, babies crying, and a team of women working to cook a meal for over forty of us. But today, there were the sixteen Americans trying to break the language barrier and learn more about these generous, welcoming people. Many of the children asked if I was married or had any children and were surprised that the answer was no. After talking with Pablo for a while, I discovered that he was fifteen, loved chemistry, and wanted to earn a scholarship to a university in the United States and become a surgeon. After two or three hours, the meal was almost ready. I looked around the house to find the rumored feast of soup, chicken, fish, plantains, rice, and vegetables, but I realized everything was being cooked outside in a tall steel and cement apparatus. Rainwater flowed through a drainpipe from the house into an opening in the cement used for a sink. I was amazed to find that they used this device for all of their cooking and laundry.

We woke up early the next day and headed straight to the worksite. The house in front of us was barely standing, withering under the Amazon sun. The roof was broken, the base decaying, the window frames empty, the walls vandalized, and the land completely overgrown. The task ahead seemed daunting, but we got right to work, splitting ourselves into groups to work on different jobs. The sixteen of us became a big team, working together and getting to know each other very well in the process. I had never met most of the people I was working with, and we were all very different from each other, but by the end of the trip each one of them became my friend and left an imprint on me.

We were also working side by side with natives of the town who spoke no English, but we managed to communicate with them somehow. There was so much to be done because we were all determined to finish the house before we left. One day I helped set stones to make a path, and the next I painted and helped mix cement. Every day was something new. By the end, we had put in a new door and windows, dug a 10-foot deep hole for a septic system, rebuilt the driveway, built a stone path to the door, painted the entire house, and cleared all of the brush surrounding it.

Every day, the women in the town spent all morning preparing a multiple course meal for us, similar to the one served on the first day. They appreciated our work so much and wanted to give us something in return. Their generosity and kindness throughout our stay was astonishing. After lunch one afternoon, when everyone else had gone back to the worksite, the minister's wife, Jenny, came over and started talking with me. I speak enough Spanish to somewhat hold a conversation, but it was difficult to understand her because of her rushed and excited tone. She was so interested in me, asking me questions about school and my family. Then, still beaming, she reached into her pocket and handed me pair of beautiful handmade earrings made of wood and colored feathers. I was so surprised and grateful for the gift that I just kept saying, "Gracias, muchas gracias."



Rebuilding the stone path



Soon, all the women and children had gathered around me, asking me if I liked Puyo and telling me stories of their boyfriends and children. This conversation then evolved into exchanging phone numbers. After I had a list of over ten phone numbers, they wanted to go outside and pose for pictures with me under a tree. After our photo shoot, I walked back down the road to the worksite looking around at the mountains and wildlife, holding my new pair of earrings, and feeling so happy and lucky to be in such a beautiful world, completely different from my own. I still don't know why Jenny chose me to give the earrings to, but they were one of the most meaningful gifts I have ever received that will always remind me of Ecuador and the people I met there who give everything even when it seems like they have nothing.

On our last night in Puyo, we returned to the church for a goodbye service held in our honor. We had been in that same church only four days before, but this time it seemed like a new place. I now recognized every face and knew the stories behind those faces. After the service, they showered us with gifts and hugs. Many of them were crying because they didn't want us to leave, and many of us were doing the same. I never thought it would be so hard to say goodbye to people whom I had met four days earlier, especially when I could barely speak their language.

After a couple more days in Quito, we found ourselves back in the parking lot in Gales Ferry, where we had met ten days before. It was just as hard to say goodbye to each other as it was to say goodbye to the people we met in Puyo. Dad and I got home at one in the morning, and as I walked into my room and crawled into bed, the experience I just had seemed surreal. Sometimes it still

does, but the different way of life and what I learned about people are very real.

A few weeks after the trip, I flew out to Denver, to start my freshman year at the University of Denver. The classes and professors I've had so far are wonderful and I'm singing in the a cappella group. My major is still undeclared, but I'm very interested in English, communications, and psychology. I have taken what I learned in Ecuador about different places, people, and culture with me to Denver, and it has helped me gain a new perspective. I hope to go back to Ecuador in the future, but even if I don't, I will carry my experience from this trip for the rest of my life. ✨



Sewell Robinson '04 playing with local children