

One of the hardest situations for many of us Peace Corps volunteers to find ourselves in is explaining that we are not and cannot be the savior with an unending supply of money. The modern day White Man's Burden is not just one of fostering development but combating past missteps of handout aide. It is a situation, for those of use on the ground, that so often involves crushing some one's dreams and hope right before our eyes. More so, it is something that we have become hardened and accustomed to. In fact, many of us interested in development see it as a necessary evil that is simply part of the line of work. And we justify it in the name of sustainability.

But this is not a story of that.

This is a story that beings at site visit with a scared and intimidated volunteer and a child unaware of the harsh realities life had thrown her way.

Zoila was suffering from leukemia, although due to my limited knowledge of Spanish medical terms, I did not fully grasp the severity of her illness until several months in site. My ignorance, however, did not hinder our friendship. Five years old with smiling brown eyes, she immediately jumped onto my lab, stuck a red hibiscus behind my ear, and asked me my name. That was the beginning.

Time passed and our friendship grew. Sneaking away form the hordes of siblings and cousins, she would come to my house where we would play sudoku and Frogger on my cell phone until her mother would come looking for her. She would talk to me without the realization that she was only five or that we came from completely different worlds, the innocent candidness that we slowly lose as we leave childhood. Then came the big question.

*A ver... Sociedad de Lucha Contra el Cáncer* had found Zoila a marrow donor in Mexico and they were ready to move forward with her treatments against the cancer that had been dictating her life for the last three years. But her parents were worried. Their family of five only lived off of the meager income of her father's job at the *bananera* and although the government would cover the actual treatment it did not help with the small expenses: the medicines, the ointments the IV tubes, the hospital pajamas, the traveling expenses to Guayaquil every week, the three months of her parents visiting her behind hospital doors. *Si puede buscar...*

They wanted me to find a sponsor. To wave my magic wand and summon the savior with his unlimited bank account. They wanted me to help their daughter. And in a moment of questionable weakness, I agreed. I could not crush this dream and dish out the hard fact that not every American has hundred dollar bills flowing out of their pockets. This was more than a farmers' association wanting tractors and pruning shears or a school asking for new computers. This was a little girl and my friend.

Luckily, stateside, my aunt had recently retired from years of working as a coordinator at a hospital in my hometown. Still well connected, she set to work enthusiastically to raise money for Zoila's family. As long as the parents were able to provide thorough documentation of all the costs my aunt assured me that the money would be there.

As I am writing this, Zoila is still under anesthesia. Marcelo, her father, promised to call me in the morning to let me know how the transplant went. "*¿Y cómo está Ud.?*" I asked him over the phone when he called to inform me Zoila had gone into surgery. "*Ahí,*" he replied, "*luchando, pero ahora todo está en los manos de Dios.*"

Peace Corps teaches us that the most important aspect to our work in terms of development is sustainability. Without it, our two years of work is essentially worthless. Over and over we hear, "why give a man a fish when you can teach him to fish?" I am, in no way, arguing against that. But there is another aspect of Peace Corps, one of cultural exchange. This is the part of our service that seeds the friendships we will cherish long after we leave Ecuador. Friendships, though, require investing ourselves in another individual. And that is something beyond sustainability.

Marcelo and I sat in my living room pouring over the endless copies of hospital tests that he diligently brought to my house every week so Zoila's sponsors could follow the progress of her treatment. As he frantically shuffled through papers, I recalled a conversation I had with my aunt a few night prior.

"There's just so many terms I don't understand and it's all so complicated," I gabbed to her over the phone.

"And think," she said, "you grew up around medicine. Now imagine how her parents must feel. They probably understand less than you do and this is their daughter."

My aunt had not given a name to it while we spoke, but what she was describing was fear and I saw it flash before me in Marcelo's eyes. Suddenly the fear faded and tears fell in behind it.

"My newborn," he started, "is sick, my wife is tired because I'm at the hospital all the time and never home to help with the kids. And Zoila doesn't understand why she can't go out and play with her friends. But what more can I do?"

For a moment I froze. I have seen my father cry without shame before, but for some reason Marcelo had caught me off guard. Peace Corps had hardened me and taught me to keep my emotions well protected. Then suddenly it struck me; this was not another excerpt from an office manual. This was my friend, some one that I cared about, and some one that I was invested in. So I took Marcelo's hand and let him cry.

We have all coped with the stress of living in a developing country by joking that our time in Peace Corps is not real life. We will return after two years and still be the same age as when we left. We counter the absurd with our own absurdities. Our friends will still be the same and our family unchanged.

As much as we joke about this there is something cynical and dehumanizing lurking behind the joke. Have we become so bogged down in the jargon and "the experience" that our grip on the present reality has slipped that far? What have we done with our long-term investments in individuals?

Zoila has a long three months ahead of her. While she recovers, I continue to nurse my love/hate relationship with Ecuador. Projects come and go, organizations fall apart, and counter parts sometimes return our phone calls. All of these setbacks are intertwined with sustainability. Without it, development, as a whole, is improbable. But what matters to us, as individuals, are our investments. And I have mine.