

Building the Puzzle

An obvious “rose from the concrete” is what comes to mind as I sit in the sewing room of *Centro Cultural Y Artesanal* in Carpuela-Imbabura, Ecuador. When people think of Ecuador they usually think of the Andes, the Amazon, and the beautiful Galapagos Islands. I, on the other hand think of those things and more, a small but powerful valley region called Chota, the place that has bred the brilliant work of a forthcoming legend that I have recently come in contact with. She is a ceramicist by the name of Alicia Villalba. The transgression of each piece from this striking 34 year old Afro-Ecuadorian truly speaks louder than words.

As I think about Black History in America and how influential it is, I realize how fortunate I am to have been exposed to black history in Latin America. I smile realizing that the opportunity is even more special with my experience taking place in Ecuador. I'm elated to even be in her circle. My promoting health and wellness has transformed into something that I didn't think twice about establishing, an ethnic bond. As she molds the clay from a nearby mountain into art, Alicia shares with me her experience as an Afro-Ecuadorian artist. She talks about the struggles that Afro-Ecuadorians face in her country as I exchange my views of being black in America. The depths of her words scream with power through her modest voice. I am reminded of the strife that my black American ancestors have faced and continue to face. I realize that we are similar. As I am emerged in my first Peace Corps tour I embrace the fact that “Black History” is universal. No matter the country, year, or time, “our” struggles have been one. Growing up and developing in two different environments, Alicia and I have obvious differences. But, the greatest thing that we share and always will share is the gift of being descendants from the beautiful, bountiful, and breathtaking continent of Africa. Without stepping foot on the continent (neither has Alicia), I can describe it with those three words because of my understanding of black people, and my love for the heritage in which I found camaraderie within a new friend in Ecuador. Alicia Villalba understands the struggle of Africans throughout the world. She depicts this struggle through the Beauty, Bounty, and Breath of her artwork. I am thankful to be able to witness in person a true historian.

As I enter my final year as a volunteer I continue to not only share my culture with my Ecuadorian counterparts but I also use the time to learn. I soak up every moment I get with Alicia and women like her in our community. I say ‘our’ because it's just that. We have developed a bond and trust for one another that I believe the ancestors would highly agree upon. Yes we come from two different continents and profound cultural difference, but that sweet silent yet remarkable similarity connects us and keeps us connected like a puzzle. A puzzle that continues to build. I'm glad I've been able to find my position.