

Ecuador Revisited

Nearly 40 years after our Peace Corps service, we five RPCV's, Ron Gould, Andy Sermeno, David Huhn, Barry Gruber and I, Ralph Archung, returned to Ecuador to visit the schools that we had built. We were interested to see, first, if we could even find them; and second, were they still in use. We just wanted to know if we had made any kind of lasting effect on the lives of the children in those rural Ecuadorian villages.

The trip was successful. We found nearly all of the schools that we had built. And were gratified to see that all were still standing and in use. Here is an excerpt from my journal of one day of our trip:

Thursday, 4/29/2004 (A very big day, certainly our most emotional of the trip) Isaac, our driver, arrived on time and we left at 7:00 heading south. Stopped at a very nice restaurant, "La Vacacita", in a town called Machala (I think). Easy to spot, the building had a bunch of black and white cows painted on the outside wall. Everybody ate well. I had a "Desayuno de Campeones" which was an omelet of mushrooms, cheese and ham with Aji. (Aji is an Ecuadorian version of Mexico's "salsa picante", very good.)

Then, off to Ambato where we wound through that growing city to find the road to Pelileo. We are looking for Catimbo to find the school that Ron, Joc and I built. After a number of stops we find it! The road has been built up similar to the one to Cuatro Esquinas and Catimbo and our school are still there. In fact, they are in the process right now of constructing what looks like an indoor soccer stadium/gymnasium/auditorium beside the school. School is in session, when we arrive the kids are at recess playing futbol (soccer). It has been nearly 40 years so, of course, we didn't recognize anybody there. I stopped a little old lady leading a donkey through the plaza and asked her if she knew a man called Don Cesar Ramos. Don Cesar was the leader of the community when we lived there. She looked at me like I was a dimwit, "Of course, I know him; everybody knows Don Cesar". "He is home and his wife is over there (pointing to a hill a ways away)" She offered to help by having one of the kids playing soccer to get one of the men to call for him on the "alto parlante". We were soon to find out what an "alto parlante" was. After a few minutes the din of the kids playing soccer and the construction work was broken when a literal blasting of Ecuadorian music started playing from a series of loud speakers that were on top of the church in the Plaza. The music stopped and was replaced by a similarly loud message in Spanish, of course, that went something like: "Hear Ye, Hear Ye, the Gringos that built our school here have returned and are looking for Cesar Ramos, if anybody knows where he is, tell him to come to the plaza right now, the Gringos want to talk to Cesar Ramos -----" The message continued and repeated a number of times. After a few minutes, we saw a little red car coming down the road in a cloud of dust. The car stopped in the plaza and out of the passenger side popped old Don Cesar Ramos. This little old Saint of a man was now over 80 years old but seemed to be in very good shape. Don Cesar couldn't believe

his eyes and we couldn't either. He recognized Otto and me immediately. Many hugs and teary eyes, lots of conversation back and forth. Yes, of course he remembered that Joc was killed. He told me that I had written to him about that. And, he thanked me profusely for the letter and photo that I sent him when I got married. (That was 34 years ago) He wanted to know all about my family and what ever happened to that Ecuadorian boy, Alejandro, from Carchi that had promised to keep in touch with him. I filled in Don Cesar and told him that he would be hearing from Alejandro. I would see to that. Don Cesar's address is not that hard to remember: Cesar Ramos, Pelileo, Ecuador. By now the plaza was filling with people responding to the message over the loud speaker. A number of older people came up to us to thank us for what we had done and to identify themselves as having worked on the school too. Ron and I were moved but we just didn't remember the faces, i.e. until one little old lady came up to me and said something like, "Surely you remember me, I used to do your laundry". It was Don Cesar's wife. How could I not? But, I certainly did not remember her name. And I was about to find out that I never knew it. She related a cute little story to me that goes like this. When she was born, her parents wanted to name her after a beloved relative named Ramos. And so she was named. Later, when she met and married Don Cesar, she became, Ramos Ramos. So now this very adorable lady is blessed with a first and last name that is the same. And, Dona Ramos Ramos was effervescent with praise for what Joc and Ron and I had done for this village. She just couldn't stop showering us with praise. I was getting very teary. Don Cesar told us that, over the years, the teachers, and of course, the students did not know who was in those three pictures that were hanging on the school classroom. When it was decided to take our pictures down, Don Cesar rescued them and put them up in his house.

Now there was even a bigger crowd gathering and Don Cesar wanted us to go the Church where we could have everybody gather and have a party. I appealed to Andy to deliver a most polite refusal. This was becoming way too emotional, we had a series of hugs, handshakes and photos and made our departure. As it turned out, my camera, which I thought had a burned out battery, had simply run out of film shortly after we got to Catimbo, so I will have to rely on my shutterbug companions for picture remembrances of this event.

Upon leaving, we offered the Profesora a ride to town. She jumped on the offer and took the opportunity to remind us how dirt poor these people are. And, if there would be anything that we could do to help them get more school supplies, she would be most appreciative. She tells us that she is teaching with words only because they cannot afford text books. She implored us to help. We made no commitment, however, Ron and I talked and thought that we might get in touch with the Lions Club of Ohio to see if they would be interested in following up on the school that they had financed so many years ago. The thought here would be, rather than just send money, have the teacher make a list of the things that she thinks that they need. Perhaps we could get the Lions club to donate the money, ask the Peace Corps to buy the books etc in Ecuador and deliver the goods to Catimbo. (Ron is following up on this thought with the Lions Club at the writing of this missive)

We dropped off the teacher in Pelileo and continued on down to Banos at the foot of the active volcano, Tungurahua to have lunch. (We will read later in the Quito paper, El Comercio, that Tungurahua has had about 10 expulsions of ash, lava and steam in the last 48 hours. So now we are hearing an echo of the sound judgment of the Peace Corps. They had recently pulled out all of the Volunteers in the Banos area to get them to safer ground.) At any rate, we had lunch in a Gringo owned restaurant called "Casa Hood", named after one of the owners, Ray Hood, who as I remember was from the Northwest, Bellingham, I think. I found a store that sold camera batteries and, after my new purchase, I, of course, find that all I have to do is replace the film.

Next, Isaac is convinced that we should see a waterfall that is close by. So, after a protracted trip through a lot of construction areas, we arrived at the trail head. Barry and I started down, but could quickly see that this was not going to be a 20 minute walk in the park that was suggested. It was getting late; we took a few pictures from a "half way" point and headed back towards Quito. It turned dark, started to rain, and we had heavy traffic through Ambato, Latacunga and much worse on the outskirts of Quito. The drive to Quito brought back memories of slow trucks on two lane roads and on coming traffic with only one or no headlights. Very exciting!! We got back to our hotel at 8:30, paid Isaac for today and also for two trips to the airport tomorrow, Barry, Andy and I in the morning and Pollo and Otto at night. That was it, we were tired, we packed, snacked, reminisced about the emotional encounter at Catimbo and went to bed.