

## **The (Concrete) Jungle**

When people think about the “typical Peace Corps experience” they usually think of idyllic village life, removed from the technologies and distractions of daily modern life. They imagine a peaceful rural life with or without running water, electricity, maybe even cars. While this is certainly true for some Volunteers serving in remote communities around the world, there are also many Volunteers serving in urban settings. I’m one of them. My site, Guayaquil, is the biggest city in Ecuador and has a bigger population than my entire home state of New Mexico. Here’s a typical day in my life as an urban Volunteer.

I wake up in the morning not to roosters, but the neighborhood newspaper hawker, selling copies of El Universo, a city paper. El Universo! Come on, five more minutes. EL UNIVERSO! Okay, okay. Groggily I climb out of bed and walk to the window, trying to gauge the weather for the day. Already, the heat and humidity are oppressive, and it’s not yet 7 am. Looking out my window, I am greeted not by picturesque views of lush mountains, but by a behemoth Mall, taking up 4 city blocks. Straining my ears for the sound of the wind rustling leaves, praying for a breeze today, all I hear are the air brakes of the dozens of city buses flying down my block. As I get ready for work, I grab everything I’m going to need for the day, because I won’t be coming back for hours. I live a split Peace Corps life, meaning I live and work in two different communities. I walk to the mall to catch a bus to my barrio, a marginalized community on the southern edge of the city.

I’m a Volunteer in the Urban Youth and Families program and I work with an after-school program providing lunch and a safe, quiet place for primary school students to come do their homework. We organize recreational activities, games, and other fun doings and try and make doing your homework seem like a lot more fun than it is. Since Ecuador is currently in the hot, rainy season the kids are out of school and we have some vacation youth groups going.

Heading home in the afternoon, I have sweated through my t-shirt at least three times, and have dozens of fresh mosquito bites, but am happy and content from a busy, full day of work. As the sun goes down, the city lights come out, blinking and shining in all their neon glory. The red lights from the city’s cell phone towers twinkle from the top of a hill. When the garbage truck rumbles by each night, my whole apartment shakes. All these things and more I’ve come to know and love about my city life.

While there are some differences between my experience and the experience of a rural Volunteer, there are many more similarities. Being a Peace Corps Volunteer is really about the connections you make with people. People you live near, people you work with, people whose names maybe you don’t know but you pass them at the same time everyday on the same street and smile and wave. Even though I don’t live in the community I work in, I have connections with many of the people that do. I walk past the same refrigerator repair man everyday, and we smile and exchange pleasantries. A few weeks ago I had a minor crisis and he came to my

apartment and performed open heart surgery on my big, refurbished, yellow fridge while I stood by frantically wringing my hands, hoping for a miracle. I'm glad to report the Yellow Submarine is back up and running. I pass the same woman, Manuela, selling *bolones* and *patacones* each morning, both a variation of fried plantains. Some mornings she won't let me pass without accepting a little baggie for the rest of my walk. I may not live down the street from my students, but I know where each one of them lives and frequently make home visits. When they see me coming down the street they race towards me yelling "Senorita Molly!" and ask what the plans are for the day.

Although I live in my own apartment, I live above the family I lived with my first few months at site and frequently have movie, UNO, and lemonade nights in my apartment with my host brothers. I run in the same park each morning where all the neighborhood grandmas walk, and have befriended several who proudly inform me whether I look *mas flaca o gorda* (skinnier or fatter) each week. All of these connections and dozens of other small daily interactions I have with people are a part of the global Peace Corps experience. I have a magnet on my fridge that says "All children smile in the same language" and I think of it in moments of frustration when I can't find the word I'm looking for in Spanish (or any words for that matter) and remind myself to breathe, smile, and have patience with.

Guayaquil is not a quiet village in the Amazon, but make no mistake about it, it is a jungle nonetheless. Everyday here is a wonderful adventure, and I have a feeling that many Peace Corps Volunteers the world over would say the same.

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