

Cather Circle Internship Scholarship Report

It is difficult to write about what happened to me in Peru. I have been putting off the intimidating task of writing about my experiences, hoping a detailed summary would magically write itself. Before my departure for Peru I told family and friends I would keep a travel blog while I was away, but that idea quickly proved to be impossible. At least for me it was. After meeting my host family and ProPeru volunteers and sensing all that Urubamba and the Sacred Valley had to offer, I knew those six weeks were going to fly by. Rather than spending my free time writing, I wanted to savor each moment and indulge in everything the Sacred Valley had to offer. Not to mention, by nighttime on most weeknights I was exhausted from the day's events and I spent my weekends site seeing. However, I managed to keep an updated account of my whereabouts through the more recent social networking phenomenon, Twitter. The structure of only having 140 characters to say something brief and remarkable was a convenient solution for my predicament.

But now, to elaborate. To explain. To divulge.

In rural Peru, personal cars are rare. Instead, the two-lane two-way highways are dominated by combis, shuttle buses and taxis, while community roads bustle with motor taxis, bikes and motorcycles. Each week I worked on three different projects in three different communities. One project was in Urubamba where I lived, but I commuted to the other two communities by combis, which are minivans that transport 15 to 20 people from community to community. I always looked forward to my combi rides because of the people I got to meet and watch. Not to mention the random things some people brought into the combi. One time, I looked down and saw a sheep's head by my feet. He had been laid on his side underneath the seats. Another time I had been hearing multiple monotonous high-pitch chirps, but couldn't see where the sounds were coming from. A Peruvian woman sitting behind me noticed my confusion and lifted the lid of the cardboard box on her lap, revealing about a dozen baby chicks.

As if the interesting passengers and jaw-dropping tour through rustic and mountainous Peru weren't enough, the combi drivers drove like they were in a car-chasing scene in a movie. And they honked at every opportune (and inopportune) moment. There were four basic types of honks all Peruvian drivers used: "Do you need a ride," "I'm passing you," "I don't know if there's oncoming traffic but I'm approaching an intersection, and this is your warning," and of course, "Get out of my way!" Every day, I traveled shoulder-to-shoulder with complete strangers; it was not uncommon to have people standing and hovering over others for most of the ride. Personal space is not a known concept in Peru. And apparently, neither are speed limits, lanes, depth perception or break pedals. For a culture that doesn't value time as much as Americans, Peruvian drivers sure know how to get people from point A to point B in a rush. I came to the conclusion that being driven somewhere in Peru – especially high up in the mountains – feels like going down a rollercoaster. It was like my heart and stomach were paying a 30 to 45-minute visit to my throat. I garnered the habit of not looking at the road ahead while being driven

anywhere in Peru, no matter the vehicle. This attempted solution probably assuaged about a third of my fear, as there was no way to stop my body from being jerked around the switch-backs, no matter how tightly wedged I was between other passengers. I remember my first few rides looking at the other passengers to see if they had the same look of terror on their faces as I. Emotionless. Emotionless while I was fighting back embarrassing girly squeals and focusing on keeping my last meal inside my stomach. About four weeks into my internship, one of my host sisters asked what I thought was the biggest difference between Peru and the U.S. Without hesitation, I answered, “The driving.”

Every Monday and Wednesday after lunch and a short *siesta*, I took a 30-minute combi ride to the community Huaran to work on a project called Frida’s Place. Frida is a woman who opened her home to children attending school in the Sacred Valley mountains. These children live up to two hours away from the school, making it inconvenient and unsafe to travel to and from school every day. Instead of going home after school, a group of about 15 boys and girls ages five to 14 stay at Frida’s house during the week and return home for the weekend. My job was to provide these children with educational activities and games. My internship director told me most of the children who live in the Sacred Valley are malnourished, so the first couple weeks I reviewed the principles of nutrition. We drew murals and played board games with a health-based theme. Soon I realized the problem wasn’t that the kids were unaware of proper nutrition fundamentals, it was that their parents couldn’t afford to buy healthy food. Or much food at all, for that matter. I started buying fruit and bringing it to Frida’s Place for the kids. At the beginning of my third week, Frida told me she really wanted me to teach them English, so that’s what I focused on the remaining four weeks.

The first time I went to Frida’s Place, I had them trace their hand, cut it out and color it. They wrote five things that they love about themselves on each of the fingers and on the other side five things they love about Peru – to promote self-love and patriotism. As I hung their paper hands on the windows, the little ones jumped up and down at my sides, chanting: “*Más alta, Señorita Michaela, más alta!*” each one telling me to hang their picture higher than the rest. They asked if they could continue drawing. I had only brought enough construction paper from the ProPeru office for the paper hands activity, so I asked Frida if she had extra paper. She looked at me for a few seconds and replied softly, “*No. No hay papel.*” My stomach plummeted. *Of course* they didn’t have paper. I looked at the children; their dirt-smudged faces, and crusty noses, their torn, faded clothes. One boy’s shoes were made of woven cloth. Another boy, an eight-year-old, was wearing shoes that were clearly meant for a grown man. I walked over to my backpack and took out the small notebook I had been using as a journal and a notebook for my Spanish class. I sat down and began tearing pages out. The kids swarmed around my chair sticking out their hands for their own stack of blank canvases. I kept tearing until my notebook had no more empty pages. I cried on the combi ride home that evening. I cried for the kids at Frida’s Place, for all that I had and all that they did not have.

On Thursdays I would go to the community Calca to the *K'Anchay Wasi* center. "*K'Anchay Wasi*" is Quechua for "House of Light," and it is a center for domestic abuse victims. (Quechua is the native language in Peru; most people who live in the Sacred Valley communities know both Quechua and Spanish.) There are about 30 women who regularly attend *K'Anchay Wasi* on Thursdays to chat, knit and collect payments from the products they sell in Urubamba. The main purpose of *K'Anchay Wasi* is to help the women market and sell their knitwear so they can become financially independent from their husbands. As an advertising major in college, I came in with all these ideas on how to promote their work; I wanted to interview each woman, create a Web site with pictures of their products, online payment access, each woman's background story, ect. However, after meeting the women, I sensed that domestic violence support groups are vastly different from those in the U.S. There is a cultural acceptance of violence against women in Peru; therefore, it is less common for women to speak out against it or even to understand their own rights. According to Reuters, "more than half of all Peruvian women over the age of 15 say they have suffered sexual or physical violence by men during their lifetime." The United Nations has named Peru one of the most dangerous places for women in Latin America. A recent study by Amnesty International and Flora Tristan, a Peruvian organization that works to protect women, found that more than 300 women have been killed in Peru by men committing sexual violence since 2003. It also found that 69 percent of women in Cusco (the nearest city to the Sacred Valley communities) said they have been the victims of sexual or physical violence. It is rare for Peruvian women to speak out about their domestic violence experiences because the Peruvian society at large believes women who are abused "must have asked for it."

These women did not go to *K'Anchay Wasi* every week to discuss their issues or find solutions for their situations; they went to *K'Anchay Wasi* to escape. To build confidence. To laugh. To learn. With this in mind, I brainstormed ways to self-empower these women rather than interviewing them and pushing an American solution on a Peruvian problem. I bought a journal and pencil for each woman and explained that sometimes it helps to write about feelings to release stress and anxiety or to make sense of an idea or issue. None of the women had owned a journal before and were excited to begin using them. The women also expressed that they wanted to learn English to help their children with their English homework; the ProPeru volunteers and I agreed to help teach them. They used the journals as diaries and notebooks for their English lessons as well. We also taught them yoga and gave them ideas for future knitting projects.

Originally, my Tuesdays were supposed to be spent helping coach kids in La Liga de Atletismo, the track club in Urubamba. I went to two practices before being told my help was more necessary with the girls' volleyball team at one of the elementary schools nearby. While I was excited to work with the girls, I didn't know how I could be much help considering I don't know a thing about volleyball. I played soccer for 16 years at a very competitive level, one year in college for a Division II school and won the Division II National Championship in 2005. However, I could have been Mia Hamm for all they cared – women do not play soccer in Peru. As it stands today, if Peruvian girls want to become an athlete, they play volleyball. During the practices for La Liga, the boys were

kept separate from the girls; boys played soccer, girls played volleyball and both groups ran track. The first two Tuesdays, before I was told to help coach volleyball, I would kick the ball around with the boys before their practice started. They were amazed at my juggling tricks, let alone that a female knew how to play. I looked over from time to time at the girls sitting on the sideline, seeing the incredulous looks on their faces as well. But each time I asked if they wanted to play, they shook their heads fiercely. I decided my budding thoughts of starting a womens' soccer club in Urubamba were a bit too ambitious. Especially because I was only there for six weeks.

Each day I was in Peru, I was forced to think and speak in Spanish. Peru isn't like Spain, where some people know a little English. My host family didn't speak a word of English. Neither did the children or women I worked with for my projects. Neither did my internship director, Mercedes. I met with Mercedes each morning the first two weeks and talked with her in Spanish about the social and economic problems in Peru, my weekly schedule, how to get to the communities my projects were in, suggestions for activities, ect. At first I was only catching a few words here and there – the last time I had studied Spanish was three years ago. It was as if I was on a phone call with my boss and she was cutting in and out while giving me an important assignment. It was very frustrating. I would scribble down notes while she talked and later hopped onto a computer to language translation Web site. For the first couple weeks I would write down what I wanted to say to the children and women, translate it to Spanish and then review it before heading over to the project site. It was extremely difficult to be in a position of authority when I couldn't speak the language confidently. Eventually, my daily private Spanish lessons and constant practicing with my host family paid off. Now I have an intermediate-advanced level of Spanish proficiency. I want to keep learning until I'm fluent – I guess I'll just have to return to Peru someday!

The Peruvian lifestyle, atmosphere and people gave me the beautiful gift of an omnipresent serenity, which I know will stay within me forever. Being in Peru changed me, without a doubt. I appreciate the small things more often, and I enjoy a quieter and simpler lifestyle. But perhaps the greatest change, I feel smaller. There is a great big world out there and I want to invest my energy and thoughts on *its* problems, more than my own. I could have worked with domestic abuse victims and impoverished children in the U.S. and probably gotten some degree of the same feeling, but witnessing and battling such issues outside my home country is a rare and fortunate experience to undergo at age 23.

I will never forget the wonderful adventures or the laughter, joy and hardships I shared and endured in Peru. From the bottom of my heart, a sincere thank you to those in Cather Circle who helped expose and awaken me to the world.

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