

The Grey Coat Hospital
Report for Adventure Trust 2007 by Ezim Ajufu

"Hello"
"Hello"
"How can I help you?"
"Can I have a skirt, please?"
"Alright, what colour would you like?"
"Do you have pink?"
"Yes"
"Can I have a pink skirt please?"
"Yes, sure, what size would you like?"
"Can I have medium please?"
"Yes"
"How many would you like?"
"Can I have one?"
"Yes, of course"
"Anything else?"
"No, thank you"
"Bye"

For us, the conversation above is nothing short of basic; the sort a five-year-old could knock out without giving much thought to it. In fact, this is a conversation I had with nine-year-old Karla in one of our classes, after two months as her English teacher. Two months back, she barely understood when asked her name in English.

For five months of my gap year, I chose to volunteer as an English teacher in the Ecuadorian village of Yunguilla. Yunguilla is a small community of three hundred inhabitants based in the Ecuadorian cloud forest; it is about a thirty minutes drive from the capital, Quito and is accessible only by dirt road. Most Yunguillans earn a subsistence living, however, within the community there is a business partnership amongst about a sixth of the population that is currently working on developing the fledgling Eco-tourism industry in Yunguilla. At current, the majority of tourists to Yunguilla are volunteers.

For the past four years, the Gap Year organisation Gap Activities Projects (GAP) has sent two teachers to Yunguilla bi-annually; through GAP, I was able to go to Yunguilla as one of the two volunteer teachers. The English teachers undertake the responsibility of teaching English in the village primary school (current size: 28 pupils) in the morning and teach also in the afternoon in classes attended by people of all ages from the community. The village has one small primary school and no secondary school. Working hours are usually from 8:00 am till 12:30pm in the school, with a breakfast with the children from 8 till 8:30 and a lunch from 11 till 11:30. Classes resume at three in the afternoon, with students from the community, and last till six pm, after which dinner is eaten in a local home.

The Yunguillan lifestyle is a very laid back one. This came across in everything from village meetings to our meals with the local families. Our first meeting in Yunguilla was on our first day there. It was with the youth and was supposed to allow us draw up a timetable for the afternoon classes. In this meeting, one of the young boys rode the length of the room back and forth on his bike *throughout* the meeting. Most of the attendees remained standing and those that were seated were mostly engaged in some kind of conversation. At the time, I was certain that this meant they just didn't care about what we had come to do. The

dedication and respect they showed in their classes over the next five months, however, made me see that this wasn't true.

Things weren't so noisy in the adult Yunguillan meetings. Instead, what struck me about them was firstly, that we were even invited to be part of meetings about intimate issues within the community and secondly, that right from the first meeting, when I could hardly string two words of Spanish together, I was asked to contribute an opinion. In most of the meetings we attended, the chairman always seemed to save five minutes for us to contribute our opinions on the issue being discussed. When we spoke, though amongst the youngest in the room, everyone quietened to listen. This was an aspect of Yunguilla I never stopped being amazed at.

Until I came to Yunguilla, I had never truly imagined what teaching would be like. Having to explain things that I understood almost on a subconscious level was one of the hardest things I had to do as teacher. The hardest was discipline. I started teaching with the mindset of an 18 year old on a gap year. The kids, more than the older members of the community, could see that and, as kids do, took advantage. At the beginning, I had innumerable requests to go to the toilet, to sharpen pencils, to borrow equipment. Thankfully, not too long into my placement, I realised that to change their attitudes I had to change mine. For a start, this meant making lesson plans and coming to classes on time and prepared. Most importantly, it also meant taking myself seriously. When this was sorted, I found myself really wanting to make the kids understand as much as I possibly could. I planned lessons and did photocopies in the weekends to bring to class. I think my students could somehow see how much I cared for them and that made them respect me. I ended my placement like this -with the mindset of a teacher and the respect of most of my students.

A memory that will stay with me about Yunguilla was how willing people were, not only to give you a chance to try something new but, to be patient with you till you got it right. I saw this most when I spoke Spanish with them and while they taught me to make jam and cheese. While cutting the strawberries, I asked question upon question to make sure I did the right thing and even when I got it wrong, nothing was made of it; I was invited again to make more jam. In my time in Yunguilla I worked in farms, milked cows, I did some guiding, and even rode horses, to name a few. Being quite the city girl, I was terrible at most of these things, yet people, at their own personal cost, invited me again and again to come out with them and see what life in Yunguilla was really like.

I believe I came away from Yunguilla a Yunguillan- at least in part-. One thing the Yunguillans tried to do throughout our time with them was make us feel at home. Between being allowed to take part in their meetings and being invited to milk cows or make jam, I cannot remember ever feeling unwelcome in Yunguilla. I felt so involved in community life that, at times, I couldn't remember what it was like to live anywhere else. I learnt a tremendous amount in those five months. As I packed my things, sad at having to leave what had become my home, I was surprised to find myself smiling. In fact, I had wandered off to my first few days in Yunguilla. I saw the awkward 18 year old I arrived as, wondering how I was going to survive without TV, internet, a washing machine and my phone; expecting very little to be expected of me as an 18 year old teacher. I remember being really scared that I wouldn't be given the opportunity to practice my Spanish because no-one would want to speak to someone who could only manage to speak very little. I went to Yunguilla barely able to differentiate 'hola' from 'gracias'. Now, though I can't speak Spanish perfectly fluently, I'd like to think I'm not too far off doing so. As I packed, I truly felt like I was leaving home. I didn't feel like I had been on a gap year project.

I would like to thank the Adventure Trust and GAP for the invaluable support they gave that allowed me to go to Yunguilla. For the Yunguillans, this support allows people like me to be a part of their community. Being able to learn English raises grades amongst the college kids and trains Yunguilla's tourism personnel in English, enabling them to provide a better service for the large number of English speaking tourists that come to Yunguilla. Without such volunteers, to learn English, these Yunguillans would have to go into the city and pay to take English classes. The cost of all this makes learning English in this way inaccessible to most Yunguillans.

For me, your support allowed me to experience Yunguilla. This experience is something, I believe, will stay with me all my life. Finding my feet in Yunguilla and the other places I went to in my six months away has given me a new self-confidence and a passion for travelling and languages. Knowing that I can go to a country with a foreign language and a foreign culture and communicate and have such a good time has completely opened up the world for me.

The GCH motto speaks of educating girls to help them become independent women of the 21st Century. The Trust's support is, for me, one of the greatest demonstrations of this school's ongoing interest, in helping both current and old Greys achieve this independence. The community of Yunguilla and I thank you very much. Muchas gracias.