

STHS grad: Peace Corps a constant learning experience

Publisher's note: Brooke Wilkinson is one of three 2005 South Tahoe High School graduates who joined the Peace Corps upon college graduation. As it gets close to their return date, each will share with Lake Tahoe News readers their thoughts about the last two years.

By Brooke Wilkinson

I arrived in Ecuador in June 2009, just two days after my graduation from UC Davis. I was excited, anxious, and overwhelmed, to say the least. Along with 44 other hopeful volunteers, I attended a pre-service training for two months in the Andes Mountains. In this time, I learned about the Ecuadorian culture and worked on my Spanish language skills.

I was sworn in as a Peace Corps Volunteer on Aug. 19, 2009, and the following day I moved to my site on the southern coast of Ecuador. I lived in the community of Libertador Bolivar for eight months, a town of 1,500 people. Then I moved to a community 15 miles north – Ayangué, which has 1,200 habitants. I have been here for a little more than a year.



Brooke
Wilkinson
holds
Jacqueline,
one of the

babies she
witnessed be
born. The mom
asked
Wilkinson to
name her
child. She did
so after her
mom.
Photos/Provide
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I will be officially ending my service in Ecuador on July 21, and will be back in California that evening. I am highly anticipating seeing my friends and family at the airport. I have many photographs and memories to share, and I cannot wait to hear about the changes that have taken place in their lives since I've been gone.

Was my Peace Corps experience everything I thought it would be?

Not even close. It was more than I could have ever anticipated. My time as a volunteer included by far the most amazing experiences that I've had up until this point in my life. And it also included some of the loneliest and desperate times I ever hope to know.

A Peace Corps saying is that a volunteer's time in site is "the toughest job you'll ever love." I can absolutely attest to the tough part. I had some incredibly difficult times throughout my experience as a volunteer. There were times when no one would attend workshops that I had spent hours organizing, and other times when I went door-to-door to homes in my community in an attempt to find something, anything to keep me occupied. The frustration that came with a lack of involvement from community members, in addition to missing my friends and family back in the States, was more than enough to

make me crack. There were times when the only thing I wanted to do was pack my bags and get on the next flight back to California.

Now, as I look back on these tough times, I am so thankful that I managed to pull through. Ultimately, I have become a more patient, persistent, and dedicated individual, and to feel that I have gained these characteristics at the young age of 23 really humbles me. After spending a significant time away from my friends and family, I appreciate them and their presence in my life even more than I did before I left.

Of course, there were high points to balance out the harder times. The “resume-worthy” description of these experiences would include:

- Working with a local midwife, training pregnant women on the importance of nutrition and proper breast-feeding methods, as well as witnessing the birth of several precious babies (even twins!);
- Writing and receiving a grant for a \$6,000 ecotourism project to provide activities that would increase visitors to the community, therefore increasing income levels of the locals;
- Providing one-on-one HIV test counseling to women, men, and adolescents.



Brooke
Wilkinson with
adolescents

from the
community she
provided
HIV/AIDS
education to.

But if I'm being entirely honest, I have to say that the most rewarding times throughout my service include sharing meals with my neighbors, walking to the local corner store and picking out fresh fruits and vegetables, playing with the many, many children that always stopped by to see what the "gringa" was doing that afternoon. The relationships I developed with the people in Ecuador are ones that I will always cherish, and I am certain that when I will return to visit my Ecuadorian friends and family in the years to come, I will be welcomed with open arms.

With my return to the United States comes the dreaded job search. When I left two years ago, I did so with the mindset the economy would be better by the time I returned in 2011, and that as a returned Peace Corps volunteer I would have several job opportunities just waiting for me. Needless to say, this is not the case. I will join the thousands of Americans currently reading through job listings, sending out as many resumes as I can. In the meantime, I plan on taking science prerequisites at a community college so I can apply to nursing school within the next year or two. I'm also looking into training to become a doula.