

Peace Corps allows STHS graduate to help others

Publisher's note: Michelle Aguilar 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 Michelle Aguilar

BUENA ESPERANZ, Panama – You know that “talk” most grandparents get to give their grandchild? The talk where they get to say how rough they had it compared to the seemingly effortless and uncomplicated lifestyles of their grandchildren. It usually starts when the child is whining or complaining about how tough their life is. That’s when the grandparent gets the opportunity to chime in with some words of wisdom, typically starting with “well when I was young ...” fill in the blank. I think you know what speech I am talking about.

Now, how many people in my generation, “Gen Y”, will be able to give this insightful and intuitive talk to their heirs? Or maybe it will be that they will just fill in the blank a bit differently. Instead of talking about how far they had to walk in the snow, barefoot, both ways, they may fill in the blank with something like “when I was young, Twitter only gave us 140 characters, and the iPad only offered 60,000 apps, and we had to watch our movies with only three dimensions.”



Michelle
Aguilar will
return to
South Lake
Tahoe later
this year
after
completing her
commitment in
the Peace
Corps.
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Well, my grandchildren will be hearing a different story.

I lived in rural Panama, working as a Peace Corps volunteer in a remote Ngobe indigenous village named Buena Esperanza, accessible only by boat. I have seen and experienced true poverty firsthand for 27 months.

I lived in the heart of the village and my daily life was much like theirs. I practiced a minimalistic lifestyle. I lived without running water and electricity. I survived without a car, or any personal form of transportation other than the dugout canoe that took me only as far as I could row it.

I have gone without Internet for months at a time and I lived in a place where only the sun controlled my sleep pattern.

However, I did not join Peace Corps just so that I would have a good story to tell my grandchildren. I joined because I

truly believe the proverb: "Much is to be expected from those to whom much has been given." So, really, Peace Corps was just another way for me to advocate that in my personal life.

My main project in Buena Esperanza was a clean water project. Together with my community members we engineered appropriate technology to bring clean, potable water to the community. We solicited and received funds from Rotary International, a local governmental organization and other private donors. Community members were trained in construction methods adapted to the community's resource availability and maintenance techniques, emphasizing low-cost designs and the use of local resources.

Together we installed 38 water catchment systems and one clean water well which directly benefits more than 500 individuals. This provided them with clean, potable water for the first time in their lives.

I aided in the creation of a comprehensive and culturally appropriate educational program and training manual on the maintenance and use of the water system to ensure its sustainability.

I also worked closely with the women's artisan group in my community, acting as a motivator and small business consultant. Together we worked on various fundraising, budgeting and forecasting techniques, which resulted in their ability to finance their own artisan house for the production and sale of their products.

My days were also filled with more informal secondary projects including English classes, literacy projects, Girl Scout meetings and painting maps. Since most of my community members had never been farther than 30 miles from their homes and have little access to information, I found myself facilitating many informal discussions, usually sparked by photos from National Geographic magazines, about political, historical, cultural,

geographical and scientific issues regarding "the outside world."

So, now that I am at the end of my Peace Corps adventure, what do I think? I say what most returned Peace Corps volunteers would say: that I have learned and received so much more than I have taught or given.

I realize now that serving as a Peace Corps volunteer is unlike any volunteer or life experience I have had prior, and may every have again. The Peace Corps experience is about human connection, about giving a community hope, teaching them new skills and above all, helping them to help themselves. It is not about bringing in aid, dropping it off and waiting until they need it again. It is about working one-on-one or little by little to reach a goal. It is about taking time. The Peace Corps experience is about truly immersing yourself in another culture to figure out together what is right for them. Peace Corps is about working yourself out of a job (i.e. development work).

As my time here in Panama comes to an end, I am able to reflect on and appreciate all I have been given during my Peace Corps service. Most of all, I am thankful that I have been given the opportunity to see and experience the way the majority of the world's population lives. I leave Panama with a new appreciation and outlook on life.

As hard as it is to leave and say goodbye, I feel like I am ready. I am ready to move on to the next chapter in my life, and I am definitely ready to get back to Tahoe's mountain air. Once I leave Panama, I plan on traveling through Central America. But I will be back in Tahoe for the holiday season, with my plans after that are still undecided.

Thank you for your support during my few years abroad. I am looking forward to seeing some familiar faces when I get home.

For the full account of my time in Peace Corps Panama refer to

my blog.

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