

Ecuadorian Exchange

Ten Years of Mission and Friendship

by Erin Dunigan

“We never planned on this being a decade-long project,” admits the Reverend Erica (Smith) Thompson. “We thought it was a one-time deal.” Plan or no plan, Thompson is in the midst of preparations to celebrate the ten-year anniversary this August of the Adopta Una Familia Project in a barrio just south of Guayaquil, Ecuador, called Guasmo Sur. Each August for the past ten years Thompson, who graduated from PTS in 2003, has taken a team of North Americans to live and work with this Ecuadorian community.

The word “project,” as opposed to mission trip, is one Thompson uses intentionally. “We called it a building project rather than a mission trip because the idea was not so much about us going to ‘help these poor people,’ but it was more about an interchange of ideas and learning in the midst of building something together.”

Thompson first went to Ecuador in 1997 as a Peace Corps volunteer. Her mom, a dental hygienist, came to Ecuador for a visit and during that time hosted a dental clinic for the kids in the neighborhood. By the end of that ten days (and 250 teeth cleanings later) both Erica and her mother were convinced that the community of Guasmo Sur had something to offer that they would like others to experience. The next summer twenty-four people joined them. This past year there were eighty.

“It still surprises me that you can take people from really different cultures, put them together, and experience the bonds between people running so deep,” reflects Thompson. “By living with the families as well as working together, the participants are entering into relationship with them. I think this speaks to the depth of emotion that people end up having with one another.”

That emotion keeps most of the participants returning year after year. In any year, half to three quarters of the people on the trip are returnees. “We do very little recruiting, if any,” Thompson adds. “It grows by word of mouth. People have a wonderful experience and they tell their neighbor or their cousin or their coworker and we get a letter or a phone call asking, can we come too?” The core of the participants come from a handful of UCC churches in New England, including the First Congregational Church in Branford, Connecticut, where Thompson’s father is the pastor, as well as Old South Church in Weymouth, Massachusetts, where Erica began her



ministry, and Asylum Hill Congregational Church in Hartford, Connecticut, where she is now associate pastor.

The North Americans (“North” is an important qualifier since Ecuadorians are also “Americans”) live with Ecuadorian families during the weeklong project, sharing meals and day-to-day life with their host families. During the day the visitors and their host families work side-by-side on one of several sites, constructing cinderblock homes or working to continue building the community center, a three-story structure that hosts classes for children and meeting space for community organizing. In the evenings, the North Americans and their Ecuadorian host families (the total group numbers in the hundreds) gather together on the Cancha (the concrete soccer field in the center of the community) for Bingo night, to watch a play by the local school children (this past year was *Cinderella*), to join in a soccer game (the Ecuadorians almost always win), or to enjoy a communal barbecue affectionately called “meat night.” What began as a work project to build bathrooms and *pilas* (water tanks that sit on the roof to provide “running” water to the house) has become a bond of friendship and community across cultures and continents.

“I think one of the things that is unique to this project, which we didn’t foresee when we started, is the pairing up of participants with Ecuadorian families,” says Thompson. This means that even a first-time participant is immediately connected to the local community through their host family. Because they eat together, stay in the family’s home, and work together it is very much like entering into another family, rather than simply venturing into the barrio during the day and returning to a hotel and the group of North Americans at night. “By living with families the participants are entering into relationship with them at a more intimate level and I do think that is a unique experience,” Thompson reflects.

“Our world is at an all-time low right now in terms of people, nations, and cultures understanding one another,” Thompson believes. One of her goals with this trip is to begin to build bridges across that divide of understanding. It has been rewarding for her to watch walls come down (hopefully not the ones they are building) as the time spent together in such close proximity allows friendship to build. “It is amazing to watch people’s understanding of the world in which they live shift—on both sides,” she says. Both the

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Students from Guasmo Sur who participated in the Ecuador Photo Project

Photo: Erin Dunigan

August 2007 was my third trip to Ecuador as part of this project. In years past I have gone as the trip photographer, to document the work of the team with the community. But this year Erica and I decided to try something new.

I had been teaching photography to youth in Los Angeles as part of an organization called Photopiece. The aim of Photopiece is to help young people get in touch with the stories they have to tell and to encourage them to do so through images. It helps them to gain a “visual vocabulary” with which to communicate *their* world, to the world. “Do you think you might be able to teach a photo class to the teenagers during the project?” Erica asked me.

Thus the Ecuador Photo Project was born.

Over the course of five days, ten students were given a crash course in storytelling through photography. Many had never taken pictures before, and none had any training in photography. Each day we held a class session, followed by a homework assignment of shooting a roll of film (we used disposable 35mm cameras because they were inexpensive, non-threatening, and easy to use) around a particular theme such as “Portraits,” “Mad or Sad,” or “What is Guasmo?”. The course culminated in an exhibit of the students’ work hung on clotheslines on chain-link fences surrounding the concrete soccer field. The students, their families, the community, and all of the North American participants were invited to the exhibit of photos—taken by their children, of their community, for the benefit of their community. You can view some of the students’ photos on these pages.

For more information about Photopiece or to find out about hosting a Photopiece class of your own, visit www.photopiece.org or email erin@photopiece.org.



Ecuadorians and the North Americans have preconceptions of who “the other” is. But through the course of the time spent together those stereotypes are replaced by friendships that last. The Ecuadorians offered support when one of the North American’s parents died, sending emails and calling long-distance, and when one Ecuadorian young woman came to New York City to study English, she stayed with some of the North Americans. “The project is an opportunity to watch people on either side—poor and rich, white and brown, Spanish- and English-speaking—find a common humanity.” For Thompson this has been the most rewarding aspect of the project.

“We don’t want to add to the paternalism that so often can accompany mission,” Thompson explains. “We have an understanding that we go to be in community with the people—not to ‘help those poor people’ but to be in community with them.” In addition to building houses, the North American participants have joined with the community in its attempts to pressure the government for better systems of sewage and clean water. Guasmo has no sewer “system,” but a series of open ditches where the run-off collects. When the rainy season hits, these ditches often overflow onto the streets, with children and adults forced to wade through the polluted water to get to work and school. “When you have friends in a community,” explains Thompson, “it becomes natural to be concerned about what concerns them.” This concern led to the North Americans’ participation one year in a mini-marathon, running through the streets of Guayaquil to the mayor’s palace to protest the conditions. Whereas Ecuadorians protesting their water and sewage situation might not have gotten much coverage or attention, Ecuadorians along with eighty North Americans drew attention. “We want to show the families that we work with as well as the other Ecuadorians that we are in solidarity with this community,” explains Thompson. “This doesn’t mean just building their homes, but might also mean supporting them through different advocacy issues.”

But it’s not all work. In January 2007 Thompson and her husband Brian were married in Ecuador. Realizing that it would be virtually impossible for her Ecuadorian friends to attend their wedding in the United States, Thompson decided to take the wedding to them. The group of forty-five guests from the United States and thirty-five Ecuadorians spent a weekend together at the beach. “After the rehearsal dinner all of a sudden these instruments appeared—tambourines and bongos and other instruments,” recalls Thompson. “The only song that we could find that we all had in common was ‘La Bamba,’ so we just sang it over and over and over!”

“I think that story speaks to why we keep going back,” she reflects. “It’s not so much about the houses that we build—which of course is a goal—but beyond that it is about continuing to build relationships,” says Thompson. “In the midst of building physical walls, the walls that divide us are torn down.” ■

Erin Dunigan, Class of 2003, works as a freelance writer, photographer, and occasional preacher, and teaches photography to youth in Los Angeles, and in the countries of Ecuador and Mexico.

