



RESOURCES

Volunteering opportunities exist wherever you look. Here are a few from around the globe:

AZAMA COMMUNITY CENTER

Azama, Ecuador
New York-based People Helping People (peoplehelpingpeople.info; 212-545-0363) runs this and other projects around the world. The hacienda Las Palmeras, Otavalo (www.laspalmerasinn.com) provides beautiful lodging only a 10-minute cab ride from Azama.

VOLUNTEER IN INDIA

Rajasthan, India
InterExchange (www.workingabroad.org) organizes expeditions to provide education and health assistance in Jaipur and Rajasthan. Although the latter is a booming tourist region in northwestern India, the communities on the outskirts of the main economic centers are in great need, especially

the women residents. An eight-week expedition starts at \$1,795, excluding airfare.

WORLDTEACH: SOUTH AFRICA SUMMER PROGRAM

Cape Town, South Africa
After eight years on hiatus, WorldTeach (www.worldteach.org) has reinitiated its two-month teaching program in Cape Town. Volunteers teach computer classes and entrepreneurship to young people. The cost is \$3,990, including airfare from a U.S. gateway city.

BIKE AID

United States
Global Exchange (www.globalexchange.org) organizes bike rides across the country, allowing

volunteers to learn about the environment as they stop along the way to help people galvanize their communities. The program offers anti-racism training and consciousness-raising education about human rights and social justice issues. All routes have a \$200 application fee plus a minimum fundraising component.

HABITAT FOR HUMANITY

Worldwide projects
This ecumenical housing ministry (www.habitat.org) that sells houses to low-income families at no profit boasts of finishing a house somewhere every 24 minutes, having built more than 225,000 homes since 1976. Each year former President Jimmy Carter and his wife, Rosalynn, donate one week of their time to help build homes.

how to tell a story

LEARNING TO GIVE BACK, AT THE AZAMA COMMUNITY CENTER IN ECUADOR

BY PAULA DE LA CRUZ | PHOTOGRAPHY BY SHELLY STRAZIS

I TRAVELED FROM NEW YORK CITY TO Azama, Ecuador last September to volunteer at the newly expanded Azama Community Center for a week. My mission was to teach children how to write their stories. They taught me to tell my own.

Azama is a poor mountain community in the province of Imbabura, two hours north of Quito by car. The community center, built by New York-based People Helping People, houses a school and a small medical and dental clinic. Many of the children I met there were the first in their families to attend school. I was eager to contribute to their education and wanted to share in some of their experiences. My own family moved to Quito for three years in the 1970s, and I consider myself an Ecuadorian child at heart.

But this was my first trip back to Ecuador after spending my adolescent years in Argentina and my early adulthood in New York. Although I didn't remember Ecuador's physical spaces, its lush gardens, sun-baked faces, and aroma of popped corn made me feel right at home. Sometimes you forget what you've left behind until you see it again.

My 12 assigned students were waiting to meet me outside the community center, playing hopscotch and running in a nearby harvested cornfield. After the dust settled, we introduced ourselves with handshakes and hugs. Seeing that our T-shirts were no longer white, I

thought that classes from now on should start with washing our faces and hands. Some children had never seen a bar of soap before, and they didn't know what to make of it. The boys didn't care much for the soap, but all the girls understood immediately the pleasure of covering their skin with perfumed suds.

Once inside our classroom, we covered the basics of written storytelling and created a story with all the elements we'd discussed: setting, characters, problems, and a resolution. Santiago, a feisty 12-year-old, came up with the title "A Story of Goats," and then with a semi-autobiographical character who was careless and let the goats escape. But for the most part the students were very quiet and afraid to participate.

Most afternoons I traveled from my hotel to the town center in a van, but a few times I braved the walk uphill to Azama's center square. The days were always sunny and a soft breeze filled the air with the scent of eucalyptus and roasted pork. I took many rest stops along the way, partly to convince myself that it was just the altitude of 8,800 feet that was slowing me down. But I also stopped to admire the many women carrying loads to the nearby Otavalo food and crafts markets.

The crafts market is held every day in Otavalo's Plaza de Ponchos, and I thought it the perfect place for my students to unleash and channel their curiosity. Their assignment was to inter-

view the artisans and then write about them. We'd come a long way in three short days, and discussed character development and sentence structure on our way into town. Edison, my quiet, very smart student, said that it wasn't just storytelling that he'd learned during these days but "expression through questioning." I was stunned at his statement.

The Plaza de Ponchos is unusually quiet for a crafts market. The only sound one can hear is the rustle of wool tapestries flapping in the wind. We stopped at one stand where the children spotted miniature bronze llama sculptures, which they called "golden-painted llamas." Santiago asked the artisan what he did with the money he made from the objects. He replied, "I use it to eat." "And how is business?" Santiago fired back. "There doesn't seem to be much tourism these days." The artisan laughed. Then we did, too.

On my last day in Azama, we decided to expand our research with another quick trip to Otavalo, for an Internet lesson. For the most part we googled bits of Ecuadorian history, geography, and dinosaurs, but after a while all anyone cared about were lyrics from the band Daddy Yankee, which was utterly new to me. It was a great way to end a perfect exchange, because what I'd given these children was just as important for me as it was for them. For a few brief days, I gave back to Ecuador what it had given to me. □