



Testimony

Jennifer Hubert
VDO Volunteer from Canada

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Sometimes, it takes a difficult situation in your life to drive you towards a new experience. In my case, my eight year relationship with my boyfriend ended Xmas of 2005 and I felt that I needed to do something different in my life. When I heard about VDO, I knew I found the path that I wanted to take. I placed everything that I had in storage, left my job and smiled at the opportunity ahead of me.

In January 2006, I sponsored my first child. Her name is Maria Mercedes and she goes to the Acapulco school. I had the privilege to bring her to some weekend activities and also teach her computer classes at her school. I never knew that having a sponsored child would change my life. I'm looking forward to watching her grow and achieving her goals. You can view a few activities that we did together by going to <http://www.taitakuna.org/visits2006.html>.

Prior to leaving Canada, I raised some funds from the Glamorgan Wado Kai Karate Club in Calgary, AB (Canada) and from many other friends. With the funds, we built a playground in Acapulco, renovated the playground in Yanayacu, modified the swings in El Porvenir, donated sport items at four schools, and much more. You can view my project by clicking on Jen's Project on the main VDO page. Working on the projects inspired me in so many ways and when I saw the smiles on the children's faces, I knew that this was money put to good use.

When I arrived in Ecuador, I could hardly speak any Spanish. I brought my French-Spanish dictionary from home and whenever I needed something I would search the few basic words and try to make a phrase that made sense. I didn't always succeed and received many giggles from store owners or a look of confusion from others, but with repetition I would manage to get myself understood. I followed a one week Spanish course with a private teacher which was very helpful, but the fact that I was still in a culture shock, I didn't manage to retain everything through class.

When I was settled in with the other two volunteers, I made my way to the school with Maria Teresa to introduce myself. When I arrived, the kids ran at our side and greeted us with a warm hug and a kiss on the right cheek. The kids were so excited to see us and were looking forward to getting additional instructors.



Marc, Louise, Jen & children

At the schools, I assisted both Marc and Louise in English and sports. If someone happened to be ill, I would take over the class for them. On Thursdays, I taught karate in El Porvenir and Fridays I taught computing in Acapulco. No matter what you taught, the kids showed a great deal of interest and passion for learning. My way of teaching was through games and songs since I realized it was the easiest way to get the kids' full attention. I was also surprised at how much the kids, from every grade, loved to sing.

On weekends, Marc, Louise and I traveled to many places so we could get a good taste of Ecuador. We went to Cuenca, Banos, Latacunga, Tena, and many other places. My favorite spot was Tena since the weather was hot and humid and the town was filled with entertainment and excitement. In Tena, we went whitewater rafting, to Mishawalli, and went on a jungle tour. Like I mentioned to my friends via e-mail: "If there is a heaven, let it be Tena!" I guess that says it all! My biggest highlight is when I went swing jumping off the San Francisco bridge in Banos. Banos is absolutely gorgeous and close to Ambato. The town is filled with toffee makers, Sugar cane, and of course, my favorite, CUY (guinea pig). If you come to Ecuador, I hope you take the opportunity to eat some cuy. You will probably get to try it at one of the fiestas, at a typical Ecuadorian restaurant, or in Banos where they roast it on the streets. Cuy is a

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delicacy in Ecuador. Some people like it while others can't bare to even look at it. As for me, I happen to adore it!



I taught at the school for two and a half months and saved a month at the end of my volunteer experience so I could travel. At the schools, the kids called me “La Jen” whenever they wanted to address me. I’m not sure why they decided to add “La” in front of my name, but I thought it suited me quite nicely. Prior to teaching, I didn’t feel that I needed to prepare the classes too much. Instead, I chose a topic that I wanted to teach, set my goals on what I want the kids to learn and played a game related to the topic. I always had multiple games in mind in case the kids started getting distracted or bored. By the end of my experience teaching, I was able to understanding a few things the kids were saying and managed to teach a full class on my own. When I had to say my goodbyes, I was quite emotional and held back buckets of tears. Some kids gave me homemade cards with a few phrases expressing how they felt of the experience. When it was time for me to leave, they wrapped their entire self around my legs and waist trying to keep me from going. I knew from that moment that every effort teaching was rewarding for them as well as for me.

Once the teaching was over, the other two volunteers also left and I was now on my own. I headed on the coast to enjoy the final month. After visiting a few beaches and buying a bunch of bracelets made from local artists, I started to miss the kids. It felt much more rewarding when I knew I was making a difference rather than laying on the beach and soaking up some sun. After two weeks, I headed back to the schools to visit everyone and said my final goodbyes. The kids were so excited to see me again and this time it was even harder to leave since I knew I was going to be heading back home.

In a few years, I will be visiting everyone again and remember the joys that I had living an experience that has been engraved in my heart.

Big thanks to Dan McKee for inspiring me, Maria Teresa and Gonzalo for giving me continuous support, Marc and Louise for being great friends and sharing this experience with me, everyone in Canada for supporting me with continuous e-mails and to all the kids from Quinchicoto, El Porvenir and Acapulco for giving me a memorable experience.

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I am currently working on a book on the experience that I had in Ecuador. I will share it with you once I'm done. Keep your eyes open.

In life, you will always have obstacles. Don't let these obstacles stop you from achieving your goals and passions.

“Life is what you make of it!” Simple...but true!

