STHS grad makes a difference through Peace Corps

By Michelle Aguilar

As the orange trees start to bear fruit once again, I am reminded that I have been in country through a full harvest cycle. Aug. 11, 2009, I said goodbye to the world I knew and all the comforts of an American lifestyle to embark on a journey known as Peace Corps.

It is amazing how much your life can change in one year. Before arriving in Panama, I definitely was not measuring calendar days based on the harvest cycle of a citrus tree. To be honest, I had no idea what I was getting myself into when I joined the Peace Corps. Typically, I find there is a sort of thrill in the unknown. But this was the first time in my life where one decision had so many unknown factors, each with such life changing gravity. Thus, diminishing the usual thrill and making me question myself. Had I taken on too much? Could I truly handle this? Twenty-seven months is a big commitment.



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What if I don’t have electricity? Won’t I be lonely? I don’t even speak Spanish. Am I even qualified to help these people? Am I going to have to eat meat? I can’t live without my Mom’s cooking. What happens if I get sick? Who is going to kill the spiders? With the support of my family and friends, coupled

with a positive and adventurous attitude, I surrender to the unknown.

Now, 365 days after a tearful goodbye, I am experiencing my version of what is named “The toughest job you will ever love.” If you speak with any prior Peace Corps volunteer, you are likely to hear they either loved their experience or they hated it.

Just like fingerprints or snowflakes – more appropriate for Tahoe – no two volunteer experiences are the same. So far, I am in the “love it” group. I am experiencing what one would call the more traditional Peace Corps experience, in the setting of a small indigenous community on the Caribbean side of Panama. I am a Community Economic Development volunteer and the first volunteer in my community. I live, work, serve and share cultures daily with the 257 Ngobes Indians in my community.

In Panama there is a huge financial disparity between the rich and the poor. My community is among the poorest. Of the 257 people, only six of the men have jobs, and they make less in one day than you make in one hour. The average household has eight children. Transportation is all via dugout canoes. Most children do not continue their education past the sixth grade. This is grass-roots development in every sense of the word.

As with most things, time is the only thing that could answer all my questions. And time did just that. I have found the answers to some of the questions I had a year ago. It turns out, yes, I can live without electricity, and without running water, too. Apparently. I can learn a language in a year, and spiders are not so much of a worry when you have scorpions to deal with. The loneliness, lack of Mom’s cooking and sickness can de endured with a “this too shall pass” mentality and a cup of hot chocolate with cocoa that was harvested that very day. I am 12 months in, with 15 more to go, and yes, I think I can handle it.

Pretty soon I am going to be asking myself whether I can handle going back.

Twelve months ago, I saw Peace Corps as a journey. True, it has proved to be a journey so far, but not the sort of journey where you have a road map or GPS. And surely not the type of journey where you know there is always a gas station or a fast food drive-through close by. I would describe my Peace Corps experience more as the type of journey one would have riding a rollercoaster ride. There are ups and downs and moments when you question whether you're going to make it out alive, every turn is different and unforeseen. The speed at which the ride passes is fast, and when it is all over you can only hope for no regrets for the time you spent waiting in that long line, and that it was all worth it. I think you all know what this feels like … this is just life.

That is why Peace Corps asks in its recruiting campaigns, "Life is calling, how far will you go?" Life took me 3,000 miles south of Lake Tahoe, the place where I grew up and my comfort zone, to the distant and unfamiliar country of Panama. And in one year, my Peace Corps Panama experiences have been the most intense and life changing part of my rollercoaster ride so far. I look forward to seeing what the next year has in store.

If you would like to ride along, you can check out my blog or check *Lake Tahoe News* for frequent updates.

Michelle Aguilar graduated from South Tahoe High School in 2005. In 2009, she graduated from Cal Poly, San Luis Obispo with a business administration degree, with a concentration in nonprofit studies and an emphasis in marketing.

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(Photos provided and some taken by Michelle Aguilar.)