

Young Adult Medical Mission Experiences: Sarah Hahn, Peru | 2011

This past fall 2011, I spent 2 months in the small Peruvian town of Ollantaytambo. Here, I participated in the health project of the nonprofit organization Awamaki. Through a coop with local weavers and knitters, an education project, a health project, and a sustainable tourism project, Awamaki supports this community in many ways and by focusing their efforts on long term sustainability. Through the health project, I spent time observing doctors, both American and Peruvian, visiting patients with disabilities to do physical exercises and social visits, and helping with local health campaigns such as fluoridation, ophthalmology, and nutrition.

The most meaningful task I was involved with was the public health campaigns. During my time there, we were starting a mobile health clinic and travelled to the nearby community of our weaving coop to see patients and promote nutrition, hand washing, and fluoride. I was closely involved in the fluoride campaigns. Dental hygiene is very poor there and thus many people have rotten teeth full of cavities. In an effort to combat this, we visited local schools and did fluoride treatments with all the kids. In my time there we visited 5 schools in 5 nearby communities. I also assisted with medical campaigns of visiting physicians, ophthalmologists, and surgeons. I assisted mostly with translating and was able to observe and learn from the visiting doctors. It was thus an incredible experience in which I was able to see many different aspects of international health care and aid in impressive projects. As I observed the living conditions of those around me, became distanced from the consumerism of the US, and experienced the vast lack of decent health care, I discovered the true luxury that we live in as Americans and vast needs of others. My experiences increased my desires to commit myself to service and community development.



Of course my experience with the nonprofit was vastly influential but I also encountered a beautiful culture living in the most incredible valley in the middle of the Andes Mountains. I loved the relaxed lifestyle and the break from consumerism. As I hiked around, the views just kept getting better and better and led to snapshots into the lives of local communities that live miles away from car accessible roads. The culture was a living breathing part of life. Traditional dress and dances are a daily sight. Town fiestas reveal the bond of the community residing in this little piece of heaven. In addition to helping me discover my calling to bring decent health care to those who lack it, Ollantaytambo, Peru taught me to appreciate life and enjoy every amazing moment. Happiness is not gained from things, but from truly enjoying the world and people around you.

I have included a piece of my journal entry about Nati, part of Awamaki's disabilities project:
After making my way past an old house and a pen full of filthy pigs, I enter a quaint little grove of blooming trees. Soon I see the hat of a small woman sitting next to a water spigot. As I introduce myself to Nati, I look out at the farmland and valley below Ollantaytambo. She has a beautiful view from her one room mud brick, dirt floor house. Nati is a sight to behold sitting next to the water faucet. With her legs curled up underneath her, she is all upper body. She has long since lost the use of her legs and simply scoots around her house and yard. She wears a tall, brown hat typical of Quechua women with 2 long black and silver braids coming down her back. The dark, wrinkly, tough skin of her face moves and changes as she laughs. Awamaki aims to improve Nati's quality of life by paying her social visits weekly and to help her mobility by providing her with a wheel chair. As we leave Nati's little bungalow, I try to reconcile her smiling, wrinkly face, her incredible view of the lush valley below, her leaky dirt home and her tears.