



International Service Program Peru 2010 Reflections



Colorado College's International Service Program is incredibly grateful to all of our wonderful donors and supporters who made this program possible. We offer these reflections on our profound experience as an expression of our gratitude for your generous support of this program.

CC's International Service Program: A Brief History

The International Service Program is a student and staff run initiative which the Center for Service and Learning began in 2006 in order to provide students with an advanced level of service in another country. The pilot trip worked with the Himalayan Light Foundation to install solar lighting in a Tibetan refugee community in northern India. In 2007, another group returned to Melghat, the rural region of central India. The group worked with a nongovernmental organization (NGO) named MAITIRI and their program Melghat Mitra ("Friends of Melghat") to install solar lighting in a small village. In 2008, the CC group continued this partnership by completing water sanitation projects including pit toilets and bathing platforms in another small village in the area. In 2009, the group returned to help build more bathing platforms, dig compost pits, and start a village nursery.

2010: La Oroya, Peru

This year proved to be a big step for the International Service Program as it expanded its ties for the first time to Peru. The program, which traditionally ran for three weeks over Winter Break, went for ten days over Spring Break and, as a benefit, was more financially feasible for students.

Eleven students and two staff members spent six months preparing and fundraising for the ten-day trip to Peru. They worked with two NGOs:

Joining Hands and Filomena Tomaira Pacsi. The group travelled to La Oroya, Peru, an Andean Mountain town of about 30,000 at over 12,000 ft in central Peru. The town was named one of the top ten most polluted places in the world by the Blacksmith Institute in 2006 due largely in part to a U.S. owned metal refinery plant called Doe Run.

The group participated in educational projects with Filomena and Joining Hands, including giving presentations about the hazards and precautions of lead poisoning. They also worked alongside youth environmental activists to learn about the effects of mining and refining on the environment and painted a mural together showing their combined hope for the future. The group had the chance to meet with representatives from the local municipalities to discuss the issue of contamination and pollution, and travelled to trout and dairy processing plants to learn about efforts to create viable economic alternatives beyond mining.

Ultimately, the International Service Group gained a great deal of education and experience from the trip. The following are their reflections as they attempt to understand the meaning of the trip for themselves, their futures, and the people of La Oroya.



Team Peru 2010, their translators and hosts with the youth environmentalists in La Oroya, Peru

Christine Romo '10

There are certain experiences that occur over the course of one's life that leave them changed, different in some way. In my life, the International Service Trip to Peru was one of these experiences. Only now, nearly a month after returning from Peru am I able to put into words the way that my involvement with the International Service Trip and my time spent in La Oroya has profoundly impacted my life.

While service has always played an integral part in my life, before this year I had never been presented with the opportunity to participate in a service project within an international context. The International Service Trip seemed like the perfect chance to gain this experience and bring together two things that I am extremely passionate about: service and travel. While the concept of travel for travels sake is by no means wrong, in all of my previous travels none has been as rewarding as this past trip I made to Peru with the International Service Program. Being given the chance to work with a Peruvian Non-Governmental Organization (NGO), Filomena Tomaira Pacsi, allowed our group the unique opportunity to work with native peoples towards the betterment of an environmental cause that both parties felt extraordinarily passionate about. Having learned of the solidarity that can exist between groups of people not able to verbally communicate with each other on even a basic level was something I found to be truly inspirational. If I take anything away from this experience it will be that I have learned of the basic human condition that binds us all together, and if we allow it, is powerful enough to break the boundaries of both culture and language to influence positive change in the world.



Members of Team Peru 2010 working with youth environmentalists and a translator

After having participated in the International Service Program, I have been inspired to apply for the Peace Corps and, if given the chance, travel to some new part of the world and continue my involvement with international service. I feel extraordinarily blessed to have been given the opportunity to participate in the International Service Trip to Peru and it is an experience that I will carry with me for the rest of my life.

There were days in Peru that left me feeling frustrated, angry, and confused. Some days I wondered why I had agreed to go on the trip. It would be easy to sugarcoat my thoughts and feelings, to tell my friends and family that going to Peru was the best experience of my life. The truth is, however, that three weeks after our return, I'm still struggling to justify our presence in La Oroya and still trying to understand our impact on Filomena and the group of youth environmentalists.

B Torres '10

Filomena is the only organization of its kind in La Oroya, fighting for environmental justice for the community's women and children. About halfway through the trip, some of us were confused why we weren't doing more "hands-on" work. Our frustration was eased when our translator, Jed, explained that there are three models of service: humanitarian aid, community development, and solidarity through accompaniment. The last model, under which Filomena and Joining Hands operate, does not lend itself to a lot of hands-on work. For these two organizations, it's how they address the larger political issues in their community and through the model, they bring awareness to the environmental injustices women and children must face. After much thinking and debating, solidarity through accompaniment is indicative of the beginning of something much larger than I can fathom.

Although initially skeptical of the model, I understand and appreciate the value in it. The women of Filomena are taking progressive steps to better their community. The first step towards alleviating injustice is to recognize something as unjust, to bring local and global attention to it, to challenge the status quo and to demand social change. Filomena is doing just that, and through a feminist lens, these environmental issues become more than just a fight against Doe Run, they become about the livelihoods of the women and children in La Oroya and its surroundings.

By looking at their work through this model of solidarity, I can finally justify our presence in their community. Although we were only in La Oroya for six days, Filomena needed our energy to further fuel their passion. By walking in solidarity with the women and children of Filomena, we brought more attention to the environmental issues they encounter every day. We will continue working with them by making their struggles our own through letter writing, petitions, and presentations in our communities.

While I will always struggle to fully understand my experience in Peru, the dedication and courage of Filomena's women will be sources of inspiration forever. These women are empowered social agents that work every day for their own rights and give voice to the disenfranchised in their community. Being a part of their struggle, if only for a short time, is completely worth the confusion and frustration I oftentimes feel when I think back on our trip. The women of Filomena reminded me why I am a feminist, why it's good to get angry, and more importantly, why we must move beyond that anger and fight for what is just and inspire others all over the world to do the same. Filomena's model of solidarity through accompaniment suggests that feminism knows no borders. In fact, it proves that feminism needs a global community in which to thrive, and that we must all join in each other's struggles for justice.

"We must all join in each other's struggles for justice."

Hannah Varnell '12

No matter whom you ask, the International service trip to Peru provided every one of us with some pretty substantial firsts. I had my first trip to South America, first llama sighting, and first meal of cow hearts, fish scales, and guinea pigs. It was a whirlwind trip filled with novelty followed by hours of vigorous reflection to make sense of it all. Now that I am back in the familiarity of my Colorado College home, the lasting impacts of the experience are beginning to materialize. I attempt to explain the work we did in La Oroya to friends, and am continually shocked by how powerful the story I lived becomes when I share it. I tell them about the NGO with whom we partnered, Filomena, and how it represents the rights of women and children in a place where they would otherwise be overlooked. I describe the women of Filomena, pillars of unwavering poise and courage, whose presence and powerful stories left us eternally humbled and inspired.

For me, the most poignant moment of the trip occurred during a group reflection towards the beginning of our time in La Oroya. We had collaborated with youth environmentalists from the area to take soil and water samples in order to gain a better understanding of the harmful pollutants from the American factory, Doe Run, and we had spent the day touring new industries, interviewing mayors, and visiting a local school. It was a day where our status as American foreigners was undoubtedly flaunted, and we found ourselves feeling extremely uncomfortable with our role in this larger movement for social justice. We questioned whether we were even making an impact or helping a cause, or whether our presence was just highlighting the differences in the privileged world we came from and La Oroya, a place where poverty and social injustice were rampant.

"I attempt to explain the work we did in La Oroya to friends, and am continually shocked by how powerful the story I lived becomes when I share it."

Helpless victims of our upper-class lives, we sat in a circle, silently asking ourselves, "Why? Why do I get to hail from a life of such privilege and opportunity? What did I possibly do to deserve this?" We felt the reality of our place as foreigners from a country who takes unquestioned free reign in exploiting the resources of less developed countries. A country who fails to pause and consider the implications of its greed. One that defines success economically, permeating a system that allows for whatever social cost will maintain our grotesquely privileged lives. It made us feel rage and guilt and infuriating helplessness to the startling inequalities on our earth.

The silence was broken when Matt, one of the staff supervisors from Colorado College for the trip, offered that he refused to be halted by rage. He said that for him, the helplessness and accompanying rage was simply the first step in a self-informing process. Insisting that forcing ourselves to overcome these visceral reactions and see where we could fit into the equation for a solution, Matt reminded us of our reasons for initially joining the trip. We justified the hours of weekly meetings, the seemingly endless fundraising, the long weekends of power points on environmental education. We were comforted to know that by engaging in this project, we were refusing to sit idly in frustration. We were educating ourselves first-hand on the devastation that can accompany globalization, and we were standing in solidarity with the members of Filomena, bringing new energy and courage to an uphill battle they have fought for 20 years.

Our presence lent a small but much needed bit of momentum to Filomena's noble battle against the pollution in La Oroya. It was a genuine effort to provide whatever support we could for a complex and difficult issue, but what I gained in return from the experience was far more invaluable. The women of Filomena reminded me of the infinite potential of human empowerment. I will carry their stories with me as a reminder to harness my most genuine passion into causes much larger than myself, into ideas and dreams and theories about change. Like these women, I hope to live a life with an imagination that is boundless and with a heart constantly seeking to give. In my pursuit to create meaning and change in a world that so desperately needs it, I am grateful to have heard the voices of the women of Filomena and the young environmental activists in La Oroya. Their raw passion and startling sacrifices are etched into my memory, and their stories help me to escape from every sure indicator humans are inevitably destroying the earth just long enough to see a glimpse of the future that is brighter than I could even imagine.



The group visiting a new dairy processing plant, one of the efforts of Filomena to create viable economic alternatives to mining



Exploring the rock forest

Kristen Sweeney '11

It is very challenging to put such a meaningful experience into so few words, but I will do my best. When friends and family have asked about my trip, it has been almost impossible to keep the answer under fifteen minutes, and even then I do not feel I have been able to accurately express the way the trip has influenced me. I have not been able to fully articulate the contrast between the horrendous environmental damage we saw to the brightness of the people we met; the enormity of the problems that face La Oroya to inspirational youth we worked with. I have no idea how to explain how moving the experience was, witnessing the youth groups passion for the issues, while also seeing how impossible their task might be. Listening to government officials express the hopelessness of their predicament and seeing the look of acceptance within their eyes, was incredible, for it is something I have never ever seen in American politics. I have never felt so small, so insignificant, for the complexities of the issues within La Oroya are so much bigger than I am. The issues grow out of a multifaceted historical context, that has many sides and several variables, in which the people and the environment have simply been collateral damage. All possible 'solutions' do not seem nearly compressive enough or are overly idealistic. Thus, in life since our trip, I have spent a great deal of time wondering, "what happens now?"

As a prelaw junior philosophy major, psychoanalysis minor and politically more moderate student, I have always been much more skeptical of everything than my peers. I do not find myself as excited or upset about the political climate as other CC students. I tend to see things in many more shades of gray. For this reason, I feel like the trip presented me with a unique set of issues. While philosophy is often idealistic and impractical, it provides you with a paradigm through which to understand, and make sense of, the world around you. This is why I love philosophy. Now that some time has passed since the trip, I believe I am starting to understand the ethical, psychological, historical, and economic factors at work in La Oroya, but can offer no inclusive resolution to the problems they face, or even a place to start. That is incredibly frustrating.

To some of the people we encountered in Peru, we, as Americans, seemed powerful and important, but within our context in the United States, we seem to have little real leverage. But now that I can put faces and names to the people this enormous problem effects, I know cannot just walk away. Now that I have felt the passion of the youth in their efforts to create change, I cannot give up helping them. While I am not sure where this will lead me, I suppose the only thing I can do is to keep trying to spread awareness about La Oroya.

Jennie Vader '10

This trip was completely different than I expected it to be, though I started with very vague expectations. After participating in two other international service trips and a placement in the Peace Corps, I spend a lot of time thinking about expectations and implications of service, particularly service abroad. For this trip, I was expecting to take soil and water samples in order to pinpoint lead contamination in the surrounding area of La Oroya. I was also expecting to learn about the NGO, Filomena, get to know the women and children involved in the organization, paint a mural, and participate in peaceful demonstrations. Overall, I wanted to go into this community, which is in a country I had never visited, and learn more about how a U.S. company is poisoning our counterparts in Peru. Our group did take the samples, did learn about the NGO, the women, and the children, and did paint the mural. These were all powerful aspects of our trip.

However, the most impactful aspect came when our liaison and director of Joining Hands, Jed Koball, explained the nature of the larger NGO, Joining Hands, and the work of Filomena. He began with the old saying "If you give a man a fish, you feed him for a day; if you teach a man to fish, you feed him for a lifetime." Jed said that there is a place for providing needs in this world, like after a natural disaster. In these times of need, organizations mobilize to provide food, water, and clothing. There are also times when we teach another to fish. These are often community development programs. However, as Jed explained, what happens when you teach someone to fish and they go to the lake to find all of the fish dead? In La Oroya's case, the fisherman goes to the river to find no fish because of a U.S. company.

Our group traveled to Peru as Americans to walk in solidarity with La Oroya. We will fight with them to hold this company accountable for polluting the environment and endangering the lives of the people in La Oroya. Though sometimes I felt like I wasn't making a difference and wasn't working hard enough, I know it will be the work that our group pursues upon return to the U.S. that will really matter. By getting to know the dedicated people that work with Filomena and other people affected by contamination, we have made a commitment to continue working on universal environmental standards and equitable living standards for all.



Team Peru 2010, the translators, and youth environmental activists at the rock forest

"Our group traveled to Peru as Americans to walk in solidarity with La Oroya."

Connie Jiang '12

"Mom, I'm going to Peru over spring break to do environmental advocacy work."

My mother breaks down into uncontrollable laughter. "Are you sure? What do you know about the environment?"

This conversation took place shortly after I had been accepted into the International Service Trip Program. It was also at that time that I realized that I had an extremely limited understanding of the environment and sustainable living. I mean, I had read articles about pollution, I had seen *An Inconvenient Truth*, and I was careful to recycle everything I could, but I lacked a true understanding [and genuine interest, for that matter] in sustainability and environmental advocacy. My experiences in La Oroya, Peru changed all that, and now I can tell my mother all about the detrimental effects of lead on the environment.

But our experience in La Oroya was about more than the environment: it was about the people. One of my first memories from the trip was when we first arrived to La Oroya. Rather than feeling the distant, foreign, and awkward interaction that I had originally anticipated, we were welcomed into La Oroya as though we were family. Despite being miles away from Colorado Springs, I felt as though I was home. During our time there, I never felt out of place, I never sensed the uncomfortable barrier or division of two different cultures. In fact, it was truly remarkable being able to form strong relationships without having a common language.

One of the most memorable experiences I had while in La Oroya was when I had the opportunity to sit down with the leaders of Filomena, Esther and Shirley, and listen to their personal narratives. Though I could not understand a single word of what they were saying without translation, the genuine passion in their voices articulated everything I needed to know.

"I could tell you what I did, I can show you what I've learned, but it was the personal connections and relationships that helped me understand, and those types of relationships are difficult to convey."

inspires me every single day, and encourages me to continue fighting for what I believe is right. It is difficult to express our experience in Peru in so few words. The people, the food, the sights, and the 80's music playing in the background each became an essential part of the trip, a precious memory that I will carry with me wherever I go. When we returned from our adventure, my mother asked me if I learned anything about the environment. I told her about the lead refinery, the lead particles that float around in the air and environment, the contamination and pollution of the river, and the detrimental health effects of lead poisoning. But when she asked if I had learned anything else, I did not know how to respond. There is an old Chinese proverb that goes: "Tell me and I will forget; Show me and I may remember; Involve me and I will understand." I could tell you what I did, I can show you what I've learned, but it was the personal connections and relationships that helped me understand, and those types of relationships are difficult to convey.

As Journey put it best in one of their songs, a song we heard quite frequently while on our trip, "Don't stop believin'...the movie never ends, it goes on and on and on and on," just as I hope our relationship with Filomena, Joining Hands, and youth environmental activists will continue for many years to come.



Painting a mural in the rain

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When we returned from our



Making friends with the Peruvian youth environmental activists

Utsarga Bhattarai '12

Jovana's mom runs a corner grocery store - a little bigger than the closet in my dorm-room. Her dad works for a refinery that extracts lead from mineral-ores to be used in car batteries globally. Owned by a wealthy New-Yorker, this refinery hasn't been complying with any of the local environmental standards and putting out life-threatening levels of lead into the environment. A cheerful twelve-year-old, Jovana greets us every morning with a contagious grin, displaying her teeth that are well past due for a dental check-up. She attends a local public school and volunteers her time at the network of local youths that partake in environmental-education projects. During her free time, Jovana resists her temptations to play outside because she understands the dirt beneath her feet isn't safe for rolling and jumping. She knows that the air she's breathing and the water she's drinking is slowly poisoning her.

Dad's job at the refinery is the family's main source of income. Jovana doesn't want the refinery to go away – after all, the lead in the air is much more difficult to notice than the lack of food on her plate. She only wishes that the refinery take a few measures to reduce the contamination of her town. Is that too much to ask for?

Prior to leaving for Peru, I was more or less unaware of what we'd be doing there: my guess was we'd be working alongside a local NGO, probably picking up trash, plating saplings and painting murals with environmental slogans – the customary environmental work. However, all my expectations were surpassed as I prepared to leave Peru. In less than a week, I had acquainted myself with almost every convoluted surrounding the contamination issue of La Oroya. I had been inspired by the courage and determination of local youths such as Jovana and other NGO volunteers as they strive for equality and justice amid multitudes of obstructions. I had seen what other alternative employment opportunities (everything from a trout processing plant to a dairy) the locals were exploring so that working in the refinery was not their only option. While I had not participated in any active service work (such as picking up trash) during my stay there, I had operated under what social scientists like to call, 'solidarity with accompaniment:' by accompanying the NGO and the locals for six days, we had shown them that there are people around the world who sympathize with them and are willing to work with them to resolve the issue. While our service work in Peru may not have had immediate impacts that can be gauged, it was just the foundation for a greater project which began once we got back. Our task now, through advocacy and presentations, is to highlight the issue of La Oroya and push the responsible authorities to take actions so that Jovana doesn't have to pay the price every time I drive to go skiing.

Shan Shan Chan '11

I've done service trips in the past, and I've done some travelling too. This past

spring break, though, blew my previous experiences out of the water. There's nothing like visiting a gorgeous country, experiencing a rich culture, and doing volunteer work all at the same time. Service work enriches my experience because it gives me a chance to get to know the locals and show that I care about them and what happens to them instead of continuously taking, taking, taking—like most tourists (I should know, I live in Florida).

While in Peru, I realized that I have a hard time relating to people in need of support until I am in their shoes or until I get to know them and have faces to put with the situations. Otherwise, I tend to sympathize and forget or, even worse, be unsympathetic. In Peru, I got to know the kids of the youth environmental group associated with Filomena and understood their battle against lead contamination and pollution. These youth and the leaders of Filomena are so passionate about what they do and what they stand for. They put up with unsafe living conditions and an ungrateful population they're merely trying to help, day after day. It is incredibly inspiring but also puts me to shame. I don't know that I have anything that I'm that passionate about. However, getting to know these amazing people really made the issue of contamination hit home. Here are people I know and care about, and they aren't getting the same opportunities to play and grow in a clean environment, like I do. Witnessing the passion and strength of the youth and leaders of Filomena made all the frustrations from the visits with the mayors, all the trips that made me motion sick, and all the time spent preparing for this trip...worthwhile.

If we can help to make La Oroya cleaner for these Peruvians, our new friends, all the difficulties I went through are more than worth it. I'm very grateful for the chance to go on such a life-changing service trip, to see issues first-hand, to have moments that bring tears to my eyes, to experience a new culture and try new foods. I'm grateful to get to know an amazing group of students from CC that I definitely would never have gotten to know and to gain a friendship with such passionate and inspiring youth in Peru. Nonetheless, our work is far from over. We have just started with trying to make things right since our return through petitions, letter campaigns, etc. I don't want to be just another tourist.



Sampling the river in La Oroya

Lauren Jenkins '10

The trip to Peru challenged my notions about what “service” could be. The group spent many months preparing for and educating ourselves about a very large and complex issue. As the student leader, I fully understood the immense amount of time and effort that goes into planning an international service trip. Between communicating for months on end with our host organization, planning weekly meetings and near daily fundraisers and trying to confirm hotel reservations for a group of thirteen overseas, the work at times seemed never-ending. I have also experienced the preparation from the other end, as I was a participant on last year’s International Service Trip to India, so I understand the amount of work and dedication required from each and every member of the team. Months of long, mentally challenging planning and physically challenging fundraisers built up our expectations along with our excitement. On March 11th, all our work was about to culminate in just ten short days as we began our journey in Peru.

When we arrived in La Oroya, we were given a schedule with our projects and activities for the week. Many members of the group felt frustrated that we weren’t spending our time on concrete, tangible projects, such as building a school. Instead, we spent time hanging out with local youth and hiking around a “rock forest,” where one man was working hard to preserve a large area of land with home to cave drawings and natural rock formations, passed down for generations. We spoke with many different local officials only to receive the same frustrating, bureaucratic answers and sense of hopelessness. We visited a new trout farm and toured a dairy processing plant. These activities often made us feel uncomfortable and we questioned if we could justify all the time, money, and energy spent preparing for the trip.

“It was our job...to make relationships with people thousands of miles away, to show our support of their goals for the future, and to bring awareness to the things we witnessed first-hand.”

The discussions that came from this discomfort and the questions we thought about as a group and individually were crucial to our understanding of the small role we were playing in this issue much larger than ourselves. It was not our job (nor was it our expectation) to solve eighty years of contamination and social injustice in the six short days our group visited La Oroya. It was our job, however, to make relationships with people thousands of miles away, to show our support of their goals for the future, and to bring awareness to the things we witnessed first-hand. I am again reminded of the “global community” in which we all live, and our common struggles for equality, security, and health. As members of this community, it is our duty to walk together, share our struggles and triumphs, and be supportive of each other, no matter where we are in the world. I am reaffirmed in my passion for social change and am committed to make a career fighting for the disenfranchised and marginalized populations and will always have my time in Peru upon which to draw. These exchanges and experiences, I believe, have a much stronger and lasting impact than anything we could have physically built as a group during our time in La Oroya.

All of the world’s problems will never be solved through college international service trips, but that was never the goal. While we spent months planning, organizing, and arranging for this trip, I could never have planned the growth our group experienced and the things I learned and encountered. I’ve stopped looking for tangible results or outcomes and can truly enjoy my time in Peru for the small, intimate moments with the youth, the relationships I formed, and the way it shaped me into the person I am today. I truly believe that I took more away in terms of experience and new knowledge than I could ever hope to have left behind. It’s my hope that what I’ve learned can help make me a better, more informed global citizen. Perhaps our trip will be the catalyst for some sort of positive change in La Oroya, however small. Regardless, I shared experiences with strangers who became friends that I will carry with me throughout my life, and that, to me, is worth everything.



The completed mural, which reads, “Despite the differences between our cultures and the kilometers between us, what is important is our planet”



Giving presentations to school children about lead contamination

Jazmyne Koch '12

When I was accepted for this International Service Trip to Peru I was very excited for the opportunity to participate in this program. Preparing for the trip was time consuming with fundraising, researching and presentation practicing as the main focus. Being a busy and involved CC student, I initially felt disconnected from the issues present in La Oroya. I was passionate about doing something about the unjust situation, but the trip seemed far away at the time.

The next thing I knew March came and I was boarding the plane with my packed backpack. I was in a daze boarding the bus and walking through airports, due to the lack of sleep I got the night before. As soon as I exited the plane and saw the signs in Spanish I realized that I was in Peru and the trip had begun!! Feelings of excitement, curiosity and responsibility came over me. Everything we had worked for and prepped for over the year was for this experience. It was time for us to do the service we came to do. For this service trip, it helped not having a specific job that our group had to accomplish because it gave me the opportunity to see the bigger picture. By observing the surrounding environment, tuning in to the subtleties in peoples behavior and exchanges, and listening to people's concerns helped me understand the complexity of the issues in La Oroya. This allowed me to be open to the trip experience and be more willing to go with the flow and do the activities that Filomena wanted our group to do.

My most memorable and invaluable experiences came from the interaction with Jed (the director of Joining Hands), the women from Filomena and the youth environmentalists. Before the trip we did a lot of research to educate ourselves on the present issues in La Oroya and learned all about lead, but being in the actual environment, immersed in the culture and interacting with people, made the issues much more meaningful and tangible. I learned so much more in those ten days than in the months and months of research and preparation I did before the trip.

Conversing with the youth in my limited Spanish was the most difficult, fun and educational part of the trip. They taught me a lot about their culture, their lives, what they liked to do, what they wanted to be and their favorite color. In exchange for telling them personal things about me, they shared enlightening information about their families and everyday reality. Some of the personal things they shared with our group, such as their thoughts on the environmental conditions in La Oroya, were inspirational and eye opening. Listening to the women of Filomena speak about their history, troubles and obstacles was also one of my highlights. I felt so grateful for having the opportunity to meet these amazing people and I had so much respect for these women and the work that they do. As a young woman, this experience was very special because it gave me a strong feeling of women's empowerment and it encouraged me to be like the women of Filomena and fight for the things that I believe in. I am forever grateful for this Peru service trip experience and for the wonderful bonds and friendships I made within my CC group and in the community of La Oroya.



Esther and Shirley, two leaders of Filomena



Doe Run Peru, the metal refinery plant in La Oroya

Brittney Moore '10

Murky brown water flows past the banks where houses and local businesses have staked their claims. Once

a cleaner river, there are now remnants of mine tailings and town waste that mix with the river's mud. A ride past the local metal refinery plant paints a dismal picture of the acid rain, smog and lead pollution this town has been dealing with since the company's inception. Since 1923, the metal refinery has been operating and essentially polluting the valley of La Oroya, Peru. But simply shutting down the refinery or removing the people from La Oroya is not an option. Local residents have strong connections with the area, both through their family history and their reliance on the refinery for employment. Aware that the refinery is contaminating their homes, their town and their lives, the people continue to exist as they always have. Every day, local residents breathe in lead-contaminated air, their children play in lead polluted fields and they drink from faucets and pipes lined with years of lead deposits. The people

of La Oroya experience the direct effects of pollution; it is in their soil, air and water and the lead has consequently settled in their lungs, their bodies and their blood. Sadly, lead is a poison, one that slowly kills an individual over their lifetime.

After travelling from the United States to Lima and then driving four hours by car, we finally arrived in La Oroya. Initially, it is difficult to notice all the pollution and contamination that surrounded us. But a quick glance at the white, barren mountains provided a startling reminder of what lead and other toxic waste does to the surrounding environment. For the next

Brittney Moore cont.

week, our intentions were to become familiar with La Oroya. We wanted to learn more about its people, its culture and its pollution.

“Toma muestras de suelo y agua,” or “how to take soil and water samples,” was the first lesson we engaged in with the local youth of an environmental group. Between gestural language, broken English and Spanish, as well as scientific and not-so-scientific jargon, the lesson was completed within an hour. A full day was devoted to taking soil and water samples from nearby parks, schools, residential and commercial neighborhoods. During our free time, we attempted casual conversions in both English and Spanish. We would ask, “What sound does a dog make in Spanish?” They responded, “guau guau,” while we followed with “bow wow.” Immediately, both groups recognized the ridiculousness of both our own attempts to make animal noises and the fact that dogs sound nothing like either of our cultures’ attempts to label them. Despite the randomness of our conversations, they proved to be both entertaining and educational for our vocabulary and understanding of each other’s cultures. Each day we worked with the youth, more and more personal and cultural information was exchanged through small conversations, translated presentations and brave attempts to communicate in the other group’s language. Though we had travelled there to work with the youth to better understand how contaminated their town actually was, we were also exchanging little parts of our culture, our language and our lives.



Team Peru with the youth environmental activists on the last night in La Oroya



A woman working at the trout processing plant

During our time in La Oroya, we learned that the people of the town are caught in the midst of a local, national and international fight of politics, profit and environmental responsibility. The citizens of La Oroya know, from personal experience, that their town is polluted from the mine tailings and lead filled smoke that is emitted each day from the metal refinery. Yet, they also know that without that same metal refinery, their very livelihood and means of surviving would cease to exist. We learned that the

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people, including the youth environmental activists, do not want to shut down the refinery and do not want to leave the town of La Oroya, despite the fact that living in the contaminated area damages their health. What they want is social and environmental justice. Interestingly, the same company working in Peru has its origins in the United States, where a similar metal refinery emits significantly less pollution after American citizens protested against the local contamination. The people of La Oroya asked us, “Why can’t our country and our people have the same justice your country received after protesting?” Unfortunately, we had no reasonable answer to offer. We did not know how to explain the differences between American citizens’ rights and Peruvian citizens’ rights, or if that was what truly mattered in this situation. All we knew was that there was a grave injustice. La Red and other local organizations have been protesting, fighting and campaigning for cleaner mining practices, just like American citizens did in the U.S. But after so many years of fighting, they have yet to see any significant change. Hopefully, by spreading awareness of this issue and working in solidarity with the people of La Oroya, we can help bring about the justice they are seeking.



Speaking with the mayor of La Oroya about the local government’s view on the contamination

Matt Reuer Staff Supervisor and Technical Director for the Chemistry Department

Solutions seem easy from a distance: if an outdated smelter is polluting a remote Peruvian town, just clean up the smelter or shut it down. Start a protest movement with the giant corporation, discuss corporate responsibility with shareholders, clean up the emissions a bit, and the La Oroya problem is resolved. Move on.

Scratching the surface of La Oroya, the complexity quickly grows. The people have relied on the plant since 1923, breathed leaded air for generations, and taken a perverse pride in La Oroya's contamination. Students compare their blood lead content like Americans compare standardized test scores: "I'm a 43 [mg/dL], what are you?" (note the average blood lead concentration of 33.6 mg/dL measured in 1999 is three times the threshold for pediatric lead intoxication, 10 mg/dL). If the people of La Oroya Antigua aren't demanding change for the contamination problem, why should the Peruvian government or international health organizations intervene?

Arriving in La Oroya, the scale of the contamination problem is literally mountainous. The land shows white and black scars, black from slag particulates and white from limestone dissolution (sulfur dioxide emitted from the plant reacts with water to form sulfuric acid, which then dissolves the limestone). A blackened slag heap sits on the edge of town, growing larger every day as ore becomes metal. Many children we meet show clear signs of lead and arsenic poisoning: open sores on their faces, difficulty walking, labored breathing. The tidy abstractions of articles, publications, and arguments quickly fade. Faced with a poisoned kid, what would you do?

The volunteers we met in La Oroya answered that question for me, including long-time residents, school children, and local politicians. Our hosts, the non-governmental organization Filomena Tomaira Pacsi, have been addressing this false dichotomy (employment versus environment) with any resources available in the best possible spirits. The youth environmentalists clearly want change, outraged by the lack of basic human rights in exchange for a plant job. Simple answers won't immediately resolve the contamination problem, evident from our meetings with local politicians. But if we actively join the discussion and hard work in our 'flattened' world, then we can look forward to blue skies in La Oroya.

"If we actively join the discussion and hard work in our 'flattened' world, then we can look forward to blue skies in La Oroya."



**Thank you for your interest and support!
—Team Peru 2010**

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