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Arajuno Road Project

Puyo, Ecuador

Jessica Jennifer Cohen Foundation: First Report

March 15, 2014

It has been about a month and a half since I took a bus winding through the Andes from Quito to my new home in Puyo, Ecuador to begin my position as a Program Coordinator of the Arajuno Road Project (ARP). The broad goals of the project are to provide English language instruction to five rural primary schools in the Ecuadorian Amazon and to support the surrounding communities through school gardens and nutrition initiatives. Native English speakers volunteer to serve either in the education program or the community development arm of the organization. My role is specifically targeted towards two aspects of the teaching program: volunteer coordination and administration.

Volunteer Coordination

As many of our volunteers are university students, our busiest times come during their semester breaks in the summer or winter. February and March have been somewhat slow in terms of volunteer numbers, but already I've had the chance to meet volunteers from France, England, Spain, and the United States. When no volunteers are available, I am responsible for teaching English in two schools, Escuelas Simón Bolívar and Esfuerzo. From lesson planning and preparation to classroom management, I have learned a great deal about teaching that will serve me well when it comes time to train new volunteers. I'm glad that I've had the opportunity to learn it first-hand so that I can adequately prepare others.

This is the first semester in which the Project has had two co-coordinators, which allows us to teach in each school two days each week, instead of one. Generally speaking, the Ecuadorian education system tends to work based on rote memorization and repetition. By having more time with each school, our goal is to be able to introduce new concepts in the first day and then expand upon them and deepen the students' understanding in the second day with more active and participatory exercises.

Administration

One recent development that has greatly impacted our work is a change in the English language curriculum outlined by the Ecuadorian government. This national structure was required in all schools teaching English in Ecuador, but was cancelled beginning with the 2013-2014 academic year. As such, this is the first year that the Arajuno Road Project has been able to define its own learning objectives and topic sequence. A major part of my role as Program Coordinator is to

review the former government curriculum and what was previously taught in the Arajuno Road Project to better understand what we should include moving forward, and where there might be gaps.

Another part of the project that I've enjoyed learning more about is information gathered in a census last year. The school directors from eight of the ARP schools were surveyed about their communities, including family income, nutrition level, ability to pay for school uniforms, and other relevant data that can help inform the Project's work moving forward. These surveys were conducted at the conclusion of the 2012-2013 academic year and I am excited to be able to compile the information into a more easily digestible form. Once it is collected and displayed in the form of a report, I hope that we can use it to identify the communities' most immediate needs and that it will be helpful in applying to grants. In the next four and a half months, I look forward to the arrival of more teaching volunteers and making progress on administration projects related to the curriculum and census data.