

Amy Mathew, '08

Piuntza, Ecuador

This past 2007 summer Ali and I spent about seven weeks in the small village of Piuntza in the valleys of southeastern Amazonian Ecuador. Originally looking for some type of clinically involved volunteer work, we encountered Padre Jorge's website for the Mission Clinic of Guadalupe. We decided to contact Padre Jorge who was extremely quick to respond and helpful in arranging our stay. Instead of placing us in Guadalupe, however, he set us up in the neighboring village, Piuntza. And oh am I grateful he did. During my time there I was able to meet some of the most genuine, wonderful people while spending time in the midst of the beautiful mountains of "el Oriente."



View from on top a mountain looking down on Piuntza

--Arriving to Ecuador--El Viaje--

July 1st Ali and I flew out of Miami into the cool highlands of Quito, Ecuador. We arrived without having any problems with luggage or getting through customs. We only had one situation before we left Miami when the airlines would not let us check-in the box of medical supplies we had collected to donate to the Mission Clinic. They told us that due to drug trafficking problems, any sort of medicine being transported in bulk to Central or South America during the summertime may be packed in only bags, not boxes. However, the issue was quickly resolved after we bought another bag to pack the supplies in.

Our next flight was early the next morning so we spent the night with an elderly couple, Mercedes Proaño and her husband. It was my first real experience having a complete conversation in solely Spanish. I had learned in school but I was a little unsure about actually speaking, however, when there's no other means of communicating you'd be surprised how

easily it comes out. Although it may not have been grammatically correct, everyone I met usually understood or was at least willing to try.

From the highlands of Quito we flew into a tiny airport in Loja. As we walked out of the plane we were completely surrounded by gorgeous lush mountains. From there we caught a taxi to the bus terminal, where we took a bus for 2 hours even farther east to Zamora. Zamora is smaller than Loja, however, is the largest town where people from its neighboring villages can find basically anything they need, from fruits to internet. To continue onto the villages of the Parish Guadalupe, we took another bus in the direction of Yacuambi. There is only one dirt road alongside a mountain the entire way for both directions of traffic. With all our carry-on baggage lying on top of us, the bumpy bus ride was a nice massage to add to the beautiful scenery. Looking down from the side of the mountain you can see an Amazon River valley, el Rio Zamora (River Zamora), until the road splits off at La Saquea to either Yanzatza or our direction, Yacuambi. From there the river continues to branch off into el Rio Yacuambi (River Yacuambi).



*(Left): Bridge across Rio Yacuambi to Parish Guadalupe;
(Center): Pit stop along the way from Piuntza to Guadalupe; (Right): Un Buen Paisaje*

About one hour later we arrived in Piuntza. The mark of Piuntza is el Puente (the bridge) with the frogs on it. Ranicultura (frog farming) is one of the major sources of revenue for the village. There are 3 large frog farms, which seem to be an attraction for tourists passing through.



Ranas!!

We were dropped off in the center, in front of the village park. In the middle of each pueblo you can find a tiny, well-kept park where the villagers of all ages go to play, occasionally hold meetings or just relax. We were to meet Carmita at her tienda (store). Carmita's store is one of the few small ones also characteristic of a village. The stores are usually connected to their modest houses, so they are open as long as the storekeeper is awake and usually hold the simple necessities so trips to Zamora do not need to be made so often.



A View of Carmita's Tienda from the Park

Carmita, a petite, extremely sarcastic lady with a great sense of humor turned out to be one of my dear friends in Piuntza. Each afternoon I would try and spend some time with her at her store. Soon after we arrived my host family showed up in a small, black pick-up truck—one of the luxuries I did not expect upon arriving to the village. Out came Amalia, only 29 years old, her brother-in-law, and her 4 adorable children—Andrea (13), Heidi (11), Milena (8) and Vivian (1). Although I could tell they were just as anxious as I was to find out who their new sister was, they covered it well with their great, bright smiles.



Left): Milena y her cousin;
(Center): My host family—Andrea, Vivian, Amalia, Heidi, Milena, Yuri; (Right): Amalia y Vivian

After introducing ourselves to each other we all went to meet Ali's host family. There we met Doña Anita and Don Torres, a delightful, continually smiling elderly couple who welcomed us into their home right away. Also living with them was one of their numerous grandchildren, 15-year old Christina.



*(Top Left): Christina y prima Jhoana; (Top Right): Christina, Jhoana and I in Zamora;
(Bottom Center): Ali with host family—Carmita, Jenny, Christina, Jhoana*

After settling in to our respective houses, they were quick to put us to work. The same evening we had a meeting with what seems to be the equivalent of the village board: Carmita, Maria, Doña Elvia and Don Torres. None of us had really come to the meeting with our minds set on what Ali and I would be doing. After discussing it a bit we decided that it would be best to teach English classes during our time there. We decided on a class from 9 to 11 in the morning for los niños (the children) and another class from 7 to 9 in the evening. The evening class was originally for los jovenes (the youth), however, anyone was welcome and many of our regulars turned out to be over 30. After the meeting Maria, a sweet, 27-year old woman, asked if I could work with her in the afternoons privately, which was the beginning of a great friendship. She is studying tourism and is extremely dedicated to learning English for her studies.

It was incredibly easy settling in because they made me feel at home right from the start. Heidy and Milena followed me around wherever I went, from the time we would wake up at 6:30 in the morning until we all went to bed. Something I wasn't used to is how most everyone started their day's work when the sun rose and was in bed by 9 or 10 o'clock. Towards the end of my time there I started sleeping in a little more, and Milena or Heidy would come sit near my bed and wake me up adorably saying, "¡Despiertate dormilona!" or "Wake up, sleepy head!!"

--Teaching--Las Clases--

Going to class in the mornings was always a great way to start the day. The first day of our morning class we heard an announcement being made from the loud speaker at the village police house saying that all the children were welcome to class. We began teaching in a small classroom in what they called the convent, however, after about 50 students attended the second day as well, Doña Elvia and Carmita suggested that we move into a larger classroom in Piuntza's school next-door.



Ali and I with some of our morning students

The kids were a blast everyday. Many times they were hard to control, nevertheless it was always a pleasure to go to class and be with the children. Given that it was summertime, many of the children only attended when they pleased, although there were a good number of regulars. Since the children's ages ranged from 6 to 12, we would try to teach new relatively simple ideas each day. Beginning with straightforward things such as colors and numbers, as the time passed we went on to teach more vocabulary and even construct sentences. After the first couple days we also realized that both classes liked it better when we wrote everything on the board for them to copy and explained everything afterwards. While some kids would just copy the notes off the board and then want to play, there were those few that were always interested in learning every bit that we taught and more. One boy named Leiber I particularly remember. He would copy the notes down and repeat each phrase while we went over it until he got the perfect pronunciation. As one of the elder students in the group, at times he would also try and help us to control the class.



(Left): Morning students copying the day's lesson off the board; (Right): Head, Shoulders, Knees and Toes!



(Left, Center): Perhaps a little confused; (Right): Leiber helping the younger ones out

After each class we would play a game with the kids as well. Sometimes we would split up; half of us would play basketball while the others played indoor (a type of European football, however, played on a small concrete court with a smaller, harder ball), and sometimes we would just all play games together like bases (similar to kickball) or other new games the little ones would teach us. Once in awhile we would all agree on a time in the evening to play again as well. I felt

like I had an entire village full of new brothers and sisters, sometimes unable to go home because they would not let us.



(Left): Ali with kids; (Right): Like I said...hard to control...



(Left): Jugando con los Niños; (Right): The kids and I

During the first couple weeks, Ali and I got together with Maria, Carmita and Doña Elvia during the afternoons to learn a few phrases here and there or basically anything they were curious about. Although later Carmita and Doña Elvia only came whenever they could, Maria and I would at least try to meet 4 to 5 times week or whenever the two of us were free. The afternoon sessions were always fun because it was more like a casual laughter session. We became very close with them quickly as our conversations were always entertaining, free and full of sarcasm. The three of them together were a blast. Although Carmita did not always have time to sit down to learn, we always had random conversations throughout the day, always good for a laugh. Just seeing Maria would make me smile and start laughing at some of our many inside jokes.



*(Left): Junior, Maria, Jonner, Romario and I in front of Carmita's store;
(Center): Maria and I; (Right): Carmita, Wilmer and I*

After the afternoon sessions we usually had just enough time to run back home, eat dinner with the family, and come back for the evening session. The students in this class ranged from 13 to 45. One of the regulars, for example, was Gulman Shul. He was probably in his early 40's and he would always come with his partner, Gloria. He was extremely interested in anything English including music, and anytime I had conversations with him outside of class we would practice speaking. In class we would usually go over a few verbs and various sentences, and then usually have a "Como se dice..." (How do you say..?) session. I'm not sure how much the class actually learned but we sure tried and had a great fun doing so. It was nice getting to know everyone in class and being able to hang out with them outside class as well.



Ali and I with some of los jovenes in the evening class

--The Village--El Pueblo--

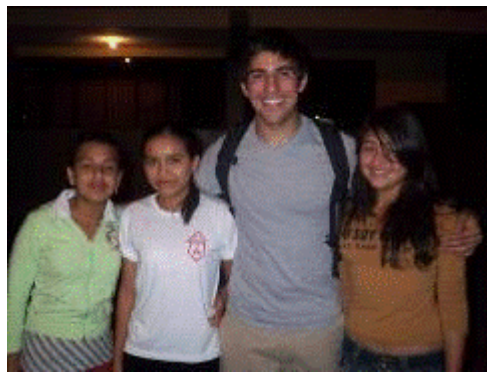
The houses we both lived in are on two opposite ends on the village, which cannot be more than a mile apart. Although these two homes are on individual lots, the large majority of houses is compound—joined together in long rows and separated from each other simply by a wall. The concrete-floored homes have running water, showers, refrigerators and sometimes even a television. Although the clothes were air-dried, I was surprised to see that many families even have washing machines. Besides the countless number of bug bites I received during my stay, the only other thing I had trouble adjusting to was the ice cold showers. I quickly learned that most people took showers during the afternoon because the water would start to warm up around midday and cool back down in the evenings after the sun went down. The sun, by the way, is unbelievable. Although it was quite chilly both early in the mornings and in the evenings, when the sun was out it was almost unbearable. I am not one to usually get burned, however, after about the second week in Piuntza my skin was peeling for the first time in my life, and from then

on I began to use an umbrella when the sun was out. Interestingly enough, I learned the word for umbrella differently studying abroad in Spain than I did in Ecuador. While in Spain people say 'paraguas'—literally meaning to 'stop water,' in Ecuador they say 'sombria,'—(sombra = shade). Fitting, I'd say.

The majority of the men who work in the village itself work in either the fields, on the frog farms or as carpenters. Amalia's husband, Yuri, who I only ended up meeting the second week, is a miner, also another common occupation of the village men. Although they seem to be doing well and happy, the life of a miner is hard labor with little return. They must live up in the mountains near the mines, about 2-3 hours away from home, and are allowed to come back and see their family every 20 days for only about a week, bringing home \$200 each time. Although those jobs are only the most common, both the women and men have other jobs as well. For example, Amalia's sister works as a nurse in Zamora and Carmita works as a schoolteacher in Guadalupe during the school year.

Unfortunately, it is not very common to find students with the motivation to have a complete education. Most all the children finish escuela (elementary and middle school); however, not everyone goes on to colegio (high school) right away. Although there are quite a few that do, others decide to either not go completely or work a few years before they begin. Nevertheless, I did meet a good number that not only finished colegio, but are also studying in la Universidad (University) or have continued onto professional school. For example, both of Amalia's younger brothers, Stalin and Jorge, are studying in Loja in engineering and medical schools, respectively.

I believe one of the main reasons for this difference in education is how early families are formed in the village. It is not surprising to find families so large when family planning seems to begin soon after puberty. It is not uncommon for teenagers, sometimes as young as 15 years old, to be pregnant with child. In fact, two of my friends, a married couple of 21 and 16 years old, just recently bore a baby. Another example is a daughter of Ali's host couple, who was a grandmother at the age of 36. Although it seemed strange and even unfortunate to us, when talking to another one of their daughters about it, she told us she is happy she had children so early so she could be full of energy, active and understand them more as they grow up. One thing we also noticed is that not only do the kids mature early, but the people have a much shorter lifespan and naturally enough the women sometimes look a good 10 years older than their actual age. We were always surprised by the ages of the teenagers. Girls we thought were at least 18 or 19 were usually only 15 or 16, and those that were only 12 and 13 looked at least a few years older.



(Above Left): Jhoana and Christina getting ready for an indoor game; (Above Right): Kids in the Park;

(Bottom): Ali and girls from evening session

There are typically three cultural groups in the villages in the Amazonian region of Ecuador: the Shuar, the Saraguro, and the Mestizo. While the Mestizo farmers were more likely to blend in, the Shuar and Saraguro were evidently indigenous. For example, the Saraguro men wore thin, long braids with the traditional short, black pants and black hats while the Saraguro women wore layers of colorful, traditional clothing and beaded jewelry even in the most intense heat.

Another typical village characteristic is the large and extended families in Piuntza. Take, for example, my host family. Every so often I would be once again surprised that one more person I met was somehow or another related to the family. Everyone seemed to be a primo or prima, sobrino or sobrina. In our house lives our immediate family. Next door is Yuri's sister, Tia Lucy, her husband, and six children. In the next house down the road from them is a brother of Yuri and his four children. Amalia's sister lives more in the center and is married to Carmita's brother. Also in the center live Amalia's parents, and many of Carmita's nephews and nieces.



Some of the family and I in Amalia's house

Hands in hand with the large families and youth pregnancies are the responsibilities taken at a young age. One thing that is extremely evident is how quickly the children mature. Many times Andrea (13) and Heidi (11) would make lunch entirely by themselves for the whole family, and we would all take turns doing the dishes and laundry, Milena (8) included. The problem of having a 'nanny' is never a problem in the village as infants would be left to the care of the little ones. Adoption legalities are not necessarily a problem either. Various families not only consist of immediate family members, but also adopted siblings, nephews or nieces.



Los Niños

Ecuadorian food is one thing that definitely had to grow on me during my time there. There is a large variety of food in Ecuador; however, the staple food is largely arroz (rice) or yuca. For breakfast, along with rice we would usually have some sort of beans or platanos cocinados (boiled plantains), with huevos (eggs), chanco (pork) or pollo (chicken). After the large breakfast, for lunch we would usually only have sopa (soup) that was usually strong with the flavor of cilantro and occasionally a slice of fresh aguacate (avocado). Later, for dinner we would have a variety of things; however, on most days, dinner was something along the lines of breakfast. Once in awhile we would have tostadas for breakfast, however, bread was only used every so often as a treat or when I brought back a loaf or two from Zamora.

One traditional food item I really enjoyed was uma, a mix of corn and flour, wrapped in banana leaves and steamed. Although normally eaten without sugar, I remember introducing Heidi to uma and sugar, making it the perfect dessert as well! Three items that you must try if you ever have the chance to go to Piuntza are the tilapia, cui (guinea pig), and rana (frog). Both frog and tilapia are two major exports of Piuntza. I actually had no idea I was eating frog meat the first time I ate it; however, it was by far my favorite dish in Ecuador. I consider myself not at all picky when it comes to food; however, one thing I had trouble adjusting to was the queso (cheese). Queso is another staple part of the Ecuadorian diet, but it had a much stronger flavor than I was used to. Even so, I must admit that I began to like even the queso with platanos maduros. Not many spices are used at all in their meals. In our house black pepper was the only seasoning remotely spicy, and only a pinch was used in the entire family's meals.



Although not a common dish, one of my favorites: Empanadas!!

The fruits in Ecuador are amazing, especially if you are vegetarian. Vegetarian for 5 years, Ali had a much tougher time adjusting to the food as meat is served with just about every meal. Eggs and fruit, of course, were his favorite substitutes. There are a wide variety of fruits from the ever-abundant banana to the not so common pomegranate, but our two tropical favorites were by far the granadilla and the guanabana. While the guanabana is just the standard custard or sugar apple, the granadilla fruit was something we had never seen before. Similar to a passion

fruit, it has a yellowish-orange shell, soft white interior padding and hard black seeds with a translucent covering that you either suck or spoon out. With a little bit of sweet and a little bit of tang, it was amazing! Also, popularly grown in some backyards is another one of my favorites, caña (sugarcane). I remember one afternoon in particular where we got sidetracked and Carmita, Doña Elvia and Maria chopped down a few sticks of sugarcane from the parish garden for us to chew on.



(Left): Doña Elvia and I washing the sugarcane; (Right): Maria, Doña Elvia, Carmita and I eating sugarcane

Transportation from one town to another was never a problem in Piuntza because there is a bus service in both directions from about 5 in the morning until after 11 at night. Also, if a car is going in the direction you need to go then you can usually hitch a ride and pay the driver the usual bus fare upon arrival. The rides in the back of the small pick-up truck where you are packed in with 18 other people and legs twisted all different ways were always the most fun. Half of us were always laughing the entire way there because one body part or another had gone numb as we arrived with dust all over our face and hair.

Communication can be difficult at times in Piuntza. Given that only a handful of houses have telephones, many people use the PacificTel phone service near the center of the village. However, many people that have family members who call regularly set up times to receive the calls at someone's house phone. Yolanda, the pleasant, cheerful PacificTel lady, always had my numbers written down, ready for her to dial if I wanted to call someone. Even so, it was much easier to just set up times with my parents so they could call Carmita's house phone. Cell phone signal is not available in the village, though many people do have móviles and use them in bigger towns such as Zamora or elsewhere. I was also amazed to see that a good number of homes have computadoras; nonetheless, while you may find it in Guadalupe and Zamora, Piuntza itself has yet to receive internet service. We had brought a set of walkie-talkies to use during our time there which ended up being perfect for our purposes of communication since our houses were close enough in range for decent signal.

The beautiful thing about the people in Piuntza is that they know how to enjoy life. Although the families do not have very much to live off of, they are some of the happiest folks I have ever met. With a population of about only 1000 inhabitants, Piuntza is an intimate community where most everyone knows and is there for one another. Family and friends are all they have and for that reason, they live life to their fullest extent, living each day at a time, building wonderful relations and great friendships. Granted it was summertime, the children would knock on each others doors or just call the others from the street to play outside all day long. But play is not unique to just the children. Despite the fact that adults and young adults would work hard all day long, they left work at work to come home and enjoy a game of 'indor,' bañar or swim in the river, or just a take a stroll in the park. Life, as they would say, is tranquila in Piuntza.



--Free Time--Tiempo Libre--

It was great fun always being surrounded by kids both out in the village and at home. The children in my host family were much more close to each other than with other children of the village, but primarily because they had seven of their cousins about the same age in the two houses next-door. If the kids weren't watching novelas (soap operas) during lunch, then we were usually all playing together outside. Some days we would jump rope outside, sometimes we would play card games, and sometimes we would just play a game or two of basketball or volleyball. If we weren't playing any games then we were usually dancing around or singing to music, while the Amalia casually looked for lice in all our scalps. The little ones were fascinated by my mp3 player so it was always with them either while they ran around the house or connected it to their speakers. At one point I even taught Heidi and Milena some of an Indian folk dance I had previously performed, and although shy about it, they always wanted to practice and did an excellent job!

Soon after we arrived, Doña Anita's father passed away. He had also been living at their house in the living room; however, he had been bed-ridden and miserable for 4 years, day and night calling for Doña Anita in agony. As sad as it was that they had grown accustomed to his cries of help and there was not much they could really do, it was heart-warming to see that they still cared for him until his very last days. Although extremely sad, it wasn't unexpected and everyone almost seemed glad for him that he was finally put out of his misery. While we were preparing the casket, the couple's children and grandchildren from all over Ecuador gradually

began to come. Their daughter, another Carmita, had also come to stay for vacation the rest of our time we were there. Her daughters, Jhoana and Jenny, Christina, Ali and I became very close during our time there. The burial process was interesting to see. Bells were rung in a specific manner at the church so the villagers knew someone had passed away. The body was placed in a casket on top of a stand in the middle of the living room while family and other villagers dropped by to give their condolences. Interestingly enough, they still use formol for preservation and Doña Elvia's husband, Bolívar, and I injected it into various parts of the body before the prayers began. A few prayers were said in his remembrance that night in the living room, however, the actual mass and burial only took place two days later. In the meantime, they slaughtered one of their cows to provide food for all the people stopping in the next few days. Each part of the cow was separated and left in different buckets and for about the next 2 weeks the four fresh legs were hanging from the ceiling next to the dining table in the patio. Since Padre Jorge was away for the summertime, masses were usually said Sunday evenings when another priest was able to come by, however, this particular Sunday the mass was said in the morning. After the mass the villagers made a procession with the body all the way up to the cemetery on top of a hill. Prayers and songs were sung the entire way while the casket was laid in his preset spot on top the hill.

Being summertime, each other weekend there were always something or another going on. Throughout all of July, there were games played each weekend. Although throughout the year they play casual games each week, during July they make up teams and set up games against each other. Friday night until Sunday afternoon they would play games of both indoor and volleyball, while most the village came out to watch. It was my favorite part of the week because each time we met more people and everyone spent time together. Off to the side there were always a couple small food stands set up where they sell papas fritas (french fries), helado (ice-cream) or carne (meat-on-a-stick). Friends and family were always enthusiastically cheering the players on while the children set up a game of their own on the sidelines. Each week I looked forward to watching the games as they were competitive but of course all in good fun with a joke thrown in here and there.

The month-long juegos ended with two days of fiesta y baile (party and dance). The celebrations began with a few fun and games like a chicken race and the traditional vaca loca where a man in a cow costume dances around the park and then shoots out fireworks dangerously close towards the people. Not long after, most all of Piuntza and a few surrounding villages congregated together to watch the danzas (the competition of 3 troupes dancing to their local music in native costumes). Afterwards the floor was opened up to everyone to dance. Unfortunately it began to pour but that didn't stop at least a few of us from dancing until after midnight. => The next day as well was another round of dancing, however, this time it took place on the playing court with a live band. Luckily the weather was much more agreeable and we were able to dance until almost the break of dawn!

Although the juegos were officially over, both the games and the dancing continued for the rest of our stay there. Each Friday and Saturday night people would still come out to watch a game or two of indoor, while on Sundays actual futbol (American soccer) was played by teams made up of members of different villages. Sometimes they would be held on the big field near the cemetery in Piuntza or on the sports ground in Guadalupe. Although not often, a couple times

we would hear of a baile going on in a village nearby and a group of us would jump on the bus and go for that as well.

The small parties were always a good time as well. One of the first weekends we threw a surprise bachelorette party for Doña Anita's granddaughter, Jenny. Another weekend my host family had a party for Heidi's 11th birthday. No matter what the occasion, during parties they usually play a game with balloons where each person picks a balloon to pop, reads the message inside and follows the instructions such as sing a song, do a dance or act like an animal. Another birthday tradition is the baile de tomates where a pair puts a tomato in between their heads and dances in a circle until their tomato falls down.

Once in awhile we would make little day trips. One Saturday we decided to take some of the kids in our morning class to the Arenal, a small outdoor pool resort close to Zamora. About 20 kids showed up and we loaded them into the back of Amalia's pick-up truck and spent half the day there. It was great fun with the kids, especially because they had been looking forward to and planning it for the 3 weeks before. Another Saturday we went with Amalia's whole family to have a picnic near the river in Zamora. Although the water was freezing, it was great for a swim after eating fresh chicken and guinea pig by the shore.

Every now and then Ali and I would also go over to Guadalupe to hang out with Amanda Anderson (remarkable lady taking care of the clinic) and existing staff at the Mission Clinic. We met a great group of people from all over but mostly Germany, Switzerland and the US. We were always invited for random meals or get-togethers and even had the chance to help out a little bit at the clinic. One thing I had the opportunity to do was help take the vitals and patients' medical history and find out the reason for their visit. Although we would hear of complex cases would present themselves every now and then, many of the stories were similar: chronic back pain (kidney pain, as the patients who diagnosed themselves call it), parasites, gastritis, depression and the common cold. As interesting it was to see the various visits and watch the staff help alleviate the pain and suffering of the patients, my favourite part of the whole thing was getting to know each of the patients individually. Although at first I was uneasy about speaking Spanish with a patient myself, it was encouraging when a miserable looking patient walked out of the room with a smile—whether they were laughing at me or not. Compassion was key and the most evident characteristic of any staff member in the clinic. Even if the cure was as simple as Tylenol the doctor took the time to patiently listen to the whole story. I think many times the simple fact that someone cared made a great difference.

One of the weekends we were there we had the chance to take a weekend trip to AltaNangaritza. Ali and I went with 6 others from Guadalupe, drove about 3 hours further into the Amazon and stayed in wooden cabins for 3 days. We were able to take a small boat tour down the Amazon River, see the Peruvian border in passing on the other side of the river, see a typical Shuar village (who kept themselves more isolated than the Saraguros and Mestizos we found in Piuntza), hike up into the Rainforest and swim under a beautiful waterfall in a lovely lagoon. It was a great adventure with wonderful company—an overall exciting experience.

The last week in Piuntza was the best and the worst all at the same time. Although I was more than incredibly sad about leaving Piuntza, they made it a great time with the two despedidas

(farewell parties). Amalia and Yuri threw the first one two days before we were leaving. First supposed to only be a small dance party in the house, they ended up having the town “DJ” come, put up decorations outside and cooked enough fried rice to feed probably 100 people. Random people who heard about it or at least the heard the music stopped by so it ended up lasting almost all night and was great fun!

As if that wasn’t enough, our evening class threw us another party in our classroom the day before we were leaving. They had decorated the classroom and brought drinks, snacks, my favorite empanadas and even cake! Although it was just our class at first and a few friends from Guadalupe, that too ended up being an all night occasion with people stopping by, the balloon game, music and dancing. It was a great ending to our amazing time there, despite the fact a few of us were flooding with tears.

--Como Les Extraño--

It was amazing how welcome and at home the villagers made us feel during our time there. I think a lot of it had to do with the culture, for example, things as simple as them saying “Buenos Días,” “Buenas Tardes,” and “Buenas Noches” to each and every passerby. A few of them were always concerned with if we were doing okay and I never once felt unsafe or alone during my whole time there. If I was out in the park later than normal after class to receive a phone call or just to hang out, someone was usually even sure to walk me home for company and for protection from the poisonous snakes and dogs.

Although the families in the villages do not live off of very much, they always seemed happier than anyone I have met with more. They knew how to enjoy the simple things in life and live and enjoy life one day at a time. Being used to visiting India with my family each summer, I luckily did not go through any sort of culture shock, however, I don’t think I have even been so attached to a place as I am to Piuntza and their people. Even though I felt like I got to know the people soon after reaching the village, I definitely became a lot closer to many of them especially towards the end of our trip. It was particularly hard to leave when just about everyone you talked to would say “No te vayas, no te vayas...” I remember the party on the last night ended because one 12-year old boy, Jonner, and I just cried for a good hour and a half until his family and I finally made him go to bed at around 4 in the morning. Fortunately, I have been able to keep in touch with a good number of people in Piuntza pretty regularly every one or two weeks, either by setting up times on the phone or even through e-mail.

--Y Ya Está--

Gracias a Dios we did not have any major health issues while we were there. Since we were wary of drinking the water, we had each brought our own filtered water bottles. At first we were always careful with eating raw vegetables as well. Ali was even as careful to brush his teeth with the water bottle. However, towards the end of the trip I not only started eating all the

vegetables but began drinking fresh juices Amalia would blend at times too. The number of bug bites I had the first few weeks I couldn't even begin to count (moscos I think was the general terms for these almost invisible biting bugs); however, towards the end of the trip I hardly noticed I even had any. Luckily, the only thing inevitable thing was a nose allergy here and there from the humidity. The only slight problem I had was a small skin allergy from the intense heat. It arose quickly after I arrived one day after I ran with Ali to Guadalupe. I had sweated so much and taken a cold shower quickly afterwards that the change in my body temperature apparently caused me to have incredibly itchy bumps all over my mid-region. Fortunately, a bottle of Caladryl and a few weeks later they all went away.

The life for the villagers is hard and many people try to apply for work visas to mostly either Spain or the United States to make a better living. However, it was always tough to go and of course even tougher when they actually reach there. This past semester I spent abroad in Spain and was able to visit Doña Anita's daughter and granddaughter in Spain. Although they seem to be doing okay, making about 5 times as much at a McDonald's in Madrid than they would be anywhere in Ecuador, it was sad to see the difference in lifestyle in Spain as a second-class citizen than in their own country. Unfortunately many families also lose touch with family members as they usually have to also leave them behind so they can work until they have enough money to send back to them.

One thing I would strongly advise anyone who goes down to Ecuador is to take good care and keep close watch of their belongings. Although I have included a few pictures from our trip, most are from Ali's camera. I unfortunately lost about 1000 pictures on my camera from the summer as it was stolen in Quito the day before we left along with my passport, diary and other belongings. I still can't believe they're gone...moral of the story is, be sure to back your pictures up somewhere!

I had an incredible experience and amazing time down in Ecuador with the people of Piuntza and I really hope to go back again next summer to visit once again. I would also like to take this time to thank Dr. LaRow at Siena College, Albany Medical College and especially Padre Jorge in Guadalupe for giving me the opportunity to spend this past summer in Ecuador. Although we haven't met yet, I really hope to in the near future! Thanks again!