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Jacqueline Martinez sits before the one-room library where she taught English and Spanish.

Metro Intern Tests Her Teaching Skills in Thin Air of Peruvian Andes

- Future English teacher practices her skills thousands of miles away

By NED RACINE, Editor

(Sept. 25, 2008) Jacqueline Martinez spent the summer in a cold, oxygen-starved city in the Peruvian Andes, teaching low-income students who often arrived to class without shoes and spoke a dialect she could not understand.

She loved it.

Martinez, an administrative intern, wants a career teaching English as a foreign language. Hoping to practice her skills—and do a little sightseeing—Martinez traveled 20 hours by airplane to Cusco, a city in the southeast Andes of [Peru](#), approximately 11,000 feet above sea level.

Martinez expected to teach English to Spanish speakers. Because many of her students spoke the local Quechua dialect, however, she spent part of her eight weeks instructing her students on reading and writing Spanish.

"They tried teaching us [Quechua], but it's not a dialect that is written or read," she said laughing. "I couldn't understand it at all."

Martinez taught in three institutions. One was an adult/trade school called Cipermum, which instructs low-income students in the skills necessary to work in the tourism industry—by far the largest source of jobs in Cusco.

Most of her students, ranging in eight to 60, were already working for various restaurants.

She also worked in the Tesoritos private preschool, where she taught colors, songs, numbers and greetings to three- to five-year-olds.



The one-room library where Jacqueline Martinez taught English and Spanish sits in the middle of this field. The Andes are in the background.

Closest to her heart, however, was teaching at a one-room, 10-foot-by-10-foot library begun by her host mother, Maria Chacon Chavez. The library—Martinez describes it as basically a shack sitting in the center of a field—is run by volunteers and features, by Martinez's estimate, approximately 50 books.

After their school day ends, students ages three to 15 go to the library to learn how to read in Spanish and English. The library also feeds them, provides toothbrushes and toothpaste so they can brush their teeth, and gives them vitamins.

Martinez was at first shocked by the number shoeless students who arrived at the library. But what touched her most deeply—besides her satisfaction from teaching—was how grateful the students were for even small items. She remembers students happily using pencils only two inches long.

"Their faces say it all," said Martinez. "They are so grateful for everything." Everything the library uses, she noted, came from donations from volunteers.



Jacqueline Martinez taught students ages three through five at this private preschool school.

Martinez believes the most important thing she brought her students was English conversation. She believes their textbooks were awful, teaching English that English speakers do not really speak.

Martinez had traveled before, although she had never been “embedded in another culture,” an experience she recommends to anyone. Even walking down the streets of Cusco enveloped her in a very different culture.

She recalls the distinct local smells: *antikucho*, basically kabobs, cooking on small grills along the streets of Cusco; the smell of mud; and the scent of insect repellent on the tourists. “That was one smell that wouldn’t go away!” she added.

She also remembers the mix of city dwellers and residents from the outlying areas, half of them dressed in traditional clothing, the other half dressed as Metro employees would dress on a casual Friday.

Even transportation was different. Sometimes, instead of walking three hours between her host home and the her schools, Martinez would take a *combi*, a mini-van that dropped her within a block of the schools or her host home. Her *combi* was named Batman and had a large Batman symbol on the vehicle’s exterior.

And Martinez found few of her favorite foods: There were no tortillas or beans or chilies. She did learn, however, that there are 400 varieties of potatoes. She suspects she ate every variety.

“I’m not going to be going near any potatoes for a while,” she said laughing.

Two things she would like to forget were the altitude and the cold—she was in Peru during the Southern Hemisphere’s winter. Residents told her she was in Peru during one of the coldest winters ever.

At night, shallow pools of water froze. Yet, during the day, she had to wear sun block because the sun’s rays were so intense.

As beautiful as the country was, its altitude was her greatest opponent, especially her first three weeks. "You'd take three steps and you'd already be practically coughing up a lung. At the end it was easier, but [even] when we were acclimated, we couldn't walk fast. We couldn't run."

Still, she found it difficult to leave, especially to leave her students. "It was more than a teacher/students relationship; it was a friendship," she said." Some of her students email her to ask her when she is coming back.

She plans a donation drive to send back basic items such as vitamins, cough medicine, medicine and toothpaste to Cusco by the end of October.

"They love life," she said, explaining her affection for the people of Cusco. "Most of the people I met came from lower-income families. They live with their parents and their uncles and their aunts all in one house. Even though they have very few things . . . they were still happy. They appreciated everything."