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JJCF Report #2

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I have now spent 3 months living in Pisco and volunteering with Pisco Sin Fronteras. I originally intended to spend 10 weeks in total with the organization, however thanks to an extremely generous offer of additional funding I have been able to prolong my stay in Pisco for which I am hugely grateful. I am happy to report that during this time the community bathrooms project in the slum neighbourhood of *Jesus de Nazareth* in Pisco was completed more or less on time, which involved only a few late nights and working over the weekend. I was very shocked by the living conditions I encountered here – most people live in one-roomed houses of esterra (straw matting) and share these tiny spaces with up to 8 people. There are little to no sanitation facilities anywhere here, yet somehow the local people remain unwaveringly upbeat and greet us every day looking well groomed in clean clothes, which I think is much more than I could manage if I was forced into such a situation. It was very sad to say goodbye to the community who have supported us, cooked for us and spent weeks with us, although I am very happy to be leaving them with the only fully functional toilets in the whole neighbourhood. It was very difficult to say goodbye to the children in particular, for whom we have been a constant source of amusement and did not readily accept that we would not be coming back the next day. However a local woman, Carmen, has been really pushing for improvements in the community and has managed to secure government funding for the construction of a small school nearby so I am optimistic that conditions will continue to improve for the people there.

As this project came to an end, a new project was beginning on site, which involved the construction of a womens health clinic in the neighbourhood of *Tupac Amaru Inca*, a poor neighbourhood to the north of Pisco. The clinic is a new building within the grounds of an existing hospital which is staffed entirely by Cuban doctors undertaking voluntary service overseas before returning to practice in Cuba, and the hospital offers a free clinic every weekday morning which is hugely popular and invariably very busy in a country where medical care can be very expensive. In Pisco, womens health in particular is a big issue – sexually transmitted diseases, particularly HIV and AIDS have been rising amongst the community since the 2007 earthquake and domestic abuse is unfortunately commonplace. Medical advice and care offered to women realting to sexual health, contraception use and during and after pregnancy is often highly insufficient and the hope is that the construction of a dedicated, free clinic will help in some small way to improve conditions for the women of Pisco.

I felt this was a hugely worthwhile project to become involved with, and put myself forward for the position of project leader for the clinic. This is one of the largest projects which PSF has undertaken, and is being funded primarily by a French organization, *Goutte D'Eau*: the same organization who funded the construction of *Maria Parado*, the school cantine project which I

worked on for my first 3 weeks at PSF. Additionally, the municipality of *Tupac Amaru* are supporting the project and are providing all cement, sand and aggregate required to complete the concrete pours for the clinic, as well as the professional input of a local structural engineer.

Taking on the role of project leader has impacted on my stay at PSF quite dramatically although it is difficult to pinpoint exactly how. It is certainly a great deal more responsibility to manage other volunteers every day and ensure we have all the materials and tools ready days in advance so we can stay productive on site. This doesn't feel more difficult however, as I am more than happy to work harder as I feel I receive even more benefit from a hard days work and the successes that we see most days. All the volunteers are so enthusiastic and willing to work that the hardest job is to make sure that we have enough work to keep everybody busy all day! I think the main change is that I feel very attached to this particular project – I feel very grateful to everybody who comes out to work on it each day and feel entirely responsible if we encounter difficulties on site.

Thanks to the dedication of all the volunteers that have been working on the clinic, in particular those who have decided to remain solely with this project for their stay at PSF, we have managed to work rather quickly and the project is currently ahead of schedule and under budget. We have an excellent local *maestro* called Eduardo working with us on site every day whose experience is invaluable, as well as almost daily visits from the engineer working for the municipality. When I first took on the project, I felt more than slightly out of my depth and wondered if I was really the best person for the job, having never taken on anything remotely similar to this in my life. However everybody at PSF has been hugely encouraging and supportive and the “figure it out and give it a shot” attitude which is inherent throughout the organization has given me the confidence to instruct and push ahead on site even if I haven't done it before. It is my responsibility to work and coordinate with the *maestro* and engineer every day which is hugely helpful and I assume my Spanish has been improving over the last month or so as the language barrier no longer seems to be much of an issue between us!

The project has been on site for around 6 weeks now and we are currently in the process of pouring the reinforced concrete columns and bricklaying. Our first 10 days or so on site consisted of continuous hard labour, levelling the site using shovels and pickaxes and then digging a grid of 1.5 metre deep foundations, again all by hand. This was particularly hard work but was an immense feeling of achievement when they were all finished! The next few weeks involved preparing the steel reinforcements for the columns which consisted of a lot of bending and tying of steel (again all by hand) and these were attached to column bases in the foundations and poured in place. As the foundations are particularly deep, the concrete pours for these involved a few particularly hard days work, but it was fantastic to see the building beginning to grow out of the ground. Next, the ground beam reinforcements were prepared in a similar way to the columns and tied in place on top of the foundations and shuttering was set up using timber formboards to pour the concrete for the ground beam. This gave us a level footing upon which we could pour narrow plinths, which act as the base for all the walls of the building, and therefore for the last week or so we have been able to bricklay and then secure these brick walls by pouring the concrete columns which support them.

I am so proud of what we have managed to achieve on site so far and am really amazed at how fast it has all sprung up! We haven't encountered any serious problems on site, only a few issues of hitting unmarked mains pipes (four times...) while digging the foundations and thanks to a strong team of volunteers and the input of our *maestro* and engineer we haven't had any mistakes to correct, so I have my fingers crossed for the rest of the construction! Unfortunately I missed five days on site last week as my increase in time at PSF also meant that my Peruvian visa expired and had to be renewed by crossing a border. I went north to Ecuadorian border which involved about 50 hours on buses in total. It was quite a culture shock to see other Peruvian towns – Peru is a truly beautiful country with amazing colonial towns, coloured by a rich and diverse cultural heritage, whereas Pisco feels very much forgotten in comparison with its dirty streets, slum houses and rubble piled up, yet to be cleared since the earthquake 4 years ago. Being reminded of this made me feel ever more strongly about the work that needs to be done for the people of Pisco. There are more and more Peruvian volunteers being attracted to PSF which I believe is a huge step forward for the organization and vital for its long term success. A great group of students from Lima have recently left PSF, and they all spoke of their shock and amazement at the lethargic reconstruction process in Pisco – apparently government propaganda is keeping the images of the city out of the national press and the country is being presented with a very skewed image of living conditions in Pisco.

Unfortunately, the sheer scale of the clinic means that I will not be able to stay to see the completion of the project, which I am hugely disappointed about, but I am very proud of what has been constructed during my stay and I hope to see the vast majority of all construction work completed before I leave. I have been in a somewhat reflective mood the last few days as I am now having to start planning to hand the project over to another volunteer and preparing to leave PSF in a few weeks time. I feel very much at home here and from a purely selfish point of view will find it very difficult to leave all the friends I have made from all over the world and will hugely miss the happiness and enthusiasm which seems to be effortlessly ingrained within this organization and which becomes instilled in everybody who walks through the gates.