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Initial Report: My First 2 Months Back at Pisco Sin Fronteras

I've been back in Peru for two months now, and the one thing that has been verified in my time back so far is the fact that things develop and happen at a slower pace in Peru in comparison to much of the rest of the world. It's been almost four years since a reported 7.9 magnitude earthquake hit the region of Pisco, Peru and its surrounding areas. After almost four years, change is still happening at a relatively slow pace, especially in comparison to more well developed countries. However, it is important to remember that although change is occurring at a slow pace, it is still happening.

One area in particular that I am looking into is the availability and effectiveness of sex and health education within Pisco, but like everything else it's taking awhile to really jump start. Peru, and specifically Pisco, is a dominantly religious (Christian/Catholic) and machismo community. Taking these two factors in to consideration, it makes it more difficult to develop within a community in terms of education, particularly sex ed and female empowerment.

We have made headway in terms of developing relationships with many local organizations and/or experts. This is beneficial to PSF and the people we help, because by generating relationships with these organizations, we become aware of the services they offer and that way we can connect to the families we help when we recognize a need that should be addressed. PSF has become pretty well known within Pisco, therefore PSF would be a good "middle man" for connecting people in need with local services that could help them. In theory, a person/family would come to PSF to ask for help, and once the volunteers get to know the family the needs usually become more apparent. PSF is not in a place to personally provide help for all of these needs, but if we are aware of a local company/organization that that is able to provide any adequate help for these people, then it would be in the best interest of everyone if PSF is able to connect the two parties. PSF has developed a position for a "Community Liaison," who will mainly be responsible for making the connection between the family and the organization. In many ways the community liaison is basically a social worker.

Two of the local organizations that we have developed connections with is DEMUNA and CEM (Centro Emergencia Mujer). Both organizations basically deal with the social work aspect of Pisco. From my understanding, DEMUNA deals primarily with issues regarding children (i.e., helping to provide school uniforms, family violence involving children, etc.) and CEM handles issues related to violence against women. Myself and a former volunteer had a meeting with our main contact person, Yovanna, at CEM and found out that there is currently no safe house for women in Pisco, but there was one prior to the 2007 earthquake. If women approach CEM for help and want to leave a domestic violence situation, the people at CEM work to send the women to either Lima (4 hours North of Pisco) or Ica (1 hour South of Pisco). They also promote the 24-hour hotline that is offered in Pisco to those that need help or someone to talk to about being in a domestic violent situation. PSF will hopefully do a further investigation into having a new safe house for women built in Pisco. According to one contact, the local government has some land available to build on, but they do not currently have funding for such a project. This type of project will take a lot of research, because CEM wants to make

sure that the government does play a role in the running of this safe house, as they did not in the prior one.

As far as information on sex education goes in Pisco, we have learned that the local Red Cross, along with other local medical experts, do provide sexual education classes and/or workshops. Some of them go to various local schools a few times a year and talk to the students about safe sex, as well as other issues, such as drugs and gang violence. However, we have also learned that it is illegal for girls under the age of 18 to receive contraceptives, unless she has already given birth once. Peru is a “pro-life” country and abortions are therefore illegal. After the 2007 earthquake, there was a rise in teenage pregnancies and cases of HIV, but we haven’t learned of any factual reasons for these statistics, other than a possible “wartime” mentality; young women felt that they only had a short time to live and love.

Currently volunteers working on this community development project are mainly focusing acquiring more local contacts and developing those relationships. It looks like I will be mostly working alongside one other volunteer, who has a background in Psychology and speaks Spanish. In passing conversations we have decided that we will not develop the sex education any further until we find out how the issue is currently being addressed in Pisco. We are aware of various medical experts (a local gynecologist and a HIV specialist) that give sex ed workshops/classes to local kids and teenagers, but we think it would be a good idea to experience one of these classes for ourselves, so we can get a better idea of how the classes are ran and the type of information that is being provided. In the coming weeks we will make further contact with these medical experts.

I’ve also made time to finish a construction project that PSF started last year. The name of the project is “Percy’s House.” Last year was an election year for Peru’s mayors and around August of 2010, the government approached PSF with this project; they said that they would provide materials, transportation, and food for the volunteers, and PSF just had to provide the tools and labor. The project involved helping to build a brick house for a three person family - a single mom and two young children, one of which is an amputee. Percy is a 13-year-old boy, who was born with a blood disease, which led to him having one of his legs amputated in 2008. It was the stereotypical political “sob story,” but PSF couldn’t deny that this family really did need help. Before the government and PSF got involved,



Percy and his family were living in a house made out of estera (crushed, woven bamboo) and tarp, with a dirt floor, no sewage, and running water at only certain times of the day. They do not have a proper toilet or shower. Instead their toilet is a simple hole in the ground and their shower consists of buckets that they fill with water everyday when the water is on. Myself and other volunteers worked on this project consistently for one month; we dug the trenches, filled the foundations, bricked up the walls and filled the columns. We were preparing to move onto putting on a roof when the elections happened and it was suddenly decided that the government no longer had enough funding to complete the house. Out of principle, PSF chose not to use it’s own money to cover the costs to finish the house, because at the time we felt that the government should own up to its decision and follow through with the project. I left in mid-November and the project had been on hold for about 2-3 weeks. I arrived back at PSF in mid-March and the project had pretty much been abandoned. With donations made to PSF, we made it a point to pick the project back up and finish the house for the family. We returned to the site at the beginning of April and finished the original plans for the house on May 8, 2011 - an amazing gift for a

single mother on Mother's Day. The family should be moving in very soon, and there is hope that PSF will return one day to give the family a handicap accessible bathroom and shower.

I think that I have come to terms that my community development project may not be something that I will see finished, because it is something that should be going on continuously. However, I also think that seeing something started or improved for the better will be an achievement in itself.