

Pascuales: a Reflection
Harini Rajaraman

Villages often trigger an image of dirty water, leaking roofs, and dilapidated shacks, all conducive to a lifestyle of poverty, unhappiness, and struggle. What could be a beautiful little town seems encapsulated in a thick layer of dirt and disease, as kids run barefoot through the polluted streets, pushing toy boats in contaminated water, and brushing cuts and wounds up against pavement painted with hidden layers of germs and bacteria. Exposed food is attacked by swarming flies, while stray cats and dogs lick the babies after rolling around in stagnant puddles of water that is a testimony to heavy rainfall on the dirt roads. With such an impression of the rural lifestyle, those who are used to beautifully paved sidewalks, *Brita* purified water, and expensive personalized homes often have no incentive for visiting areas less privileged.

Our first impression of Pascuales, Ecuador was similar to that of media images of a city recently destroyed by major floods, hurricanes, and other natural disasters. As the tires of our *tricimoto* (three-wheeled motorcycle taxi) struggled to overcome the bumpy roads, splashing mud everywhere, we frantically stuffed our cameras and cash deep into our bags in fear of thieves and smothered ourselves with bug spray to prepare ourselves with a bubble of protection from the seemingly uncivilized villagers who we were to meet. However, as we stepped apprehensively out of the vehicle and brushed off a film of dust from our hair and clothes, we noticed small eyes peering through windows in fear of our approach. Like foreign explorers on a new land, we walked around and noticed more and more curious heads pop up from behind homes and out of windows, and soon enough, we had attracted an interested crowd of kids and women who were eagerly awaiting our arrival. As we began to speak to each other in our apparently ‘alien’ language of English, anxious kids started pouring in from every corner, fascinated by us as much as we were intrigued by their innocent faces and amazing command of the Spanish language. I soon learned to appreciate the universal appeal of the smile of a child, and was overwhelmed by a quick feeling of compassion and welcome.

Although I was thousands of miles away from what I knew as ‘home’, the twinkle in the children’s eyes and the warmth of the hugs of the women made me miss my visits to family in India. As I was openly invited to the homes of strangers, all of my fears vanished and I began to long for fluency in their language so I could show them beyond just smiles and nods that I appreciated their motherly gestures of affection and kindness. Although there was a mutual timidity, there seemed to be a potential to develop a relationship beyond just architects and clients.

As Marcela, one of the homemakers, served us freshly squeezed watermelon juice, I was reminded of my hardworking grandmother, who always used to be ready to prepare fresh snacks whenever guests were to stroll in. Even though we were warned not to drink the water of Pascuales because of the danger to our American immune systems, I could not refuse the hours of time and effort put into making the ‘American visitors’ a refreshing drink. For me, a homemade drink made with love was worth a few days of painful stomach aches.

In America, with its locks, fences, and highly advanced home security systems, finding neighbors with the generosity of the Pascualeños is rare. Families happily invited us into their homes, not only to offer us temporary shade and refreshment, but also as a gesture of impressing us with the homes they had so proudly built and earned. Each new attachment or renovation to their home, unlike in many American suburbs, was a product of hard-earned money, and the accomplishment held so much value in their lives. Seeing people sit on their scrap wood porches under their corrugated steel roofs, waving to us as we passed by, was enough to not only erase any negative thoughts, but also to bring a wave of guilt for ever having had them. In fact, it reminded me of walking through Kerala villages in India at night, when the whole town knows you are coming because your uncle or grandfather notified everyone in such excitement, and

everyone sits out at night and talks to each other from their porches across the street. Homes are open to anyone because security is not in the strength of the lock or the newest version of the alarm system, but in the depth of the bond with one's community.

Although the families in Pascuales are independent, the entire community has an interdependence that holds them together like glue. This community spirit was especially evident when everyone gathered for the celebration of our project. Simple gestures of fireworks and dancing brought over seven hundred people to support the cause of helping the children, which demonstrated that, even without higher education, a strong community can thrive when its foundation is based on good values and motivated people. In fact, the best feeling of all of my experiences in Pascuales was serving soda to the people because I felt like I had just joined this large family. I was just another niece or sister, talking to the kids in my broken Spanish and exchanging smiles to let them know that I care. What originally was a relationship of strangers was now like a bond of family, in a place that was so foreign, yet so much like home.

It was extremely gratifying to know that we were leaving the Pascualeños with a seed that they could water forever, because by helping the children, we were planting the strongest roots to help the town progress. Although I may live the life of an MIT graduate, with all of its rewards and prestige, with education, the children of Pascuales will bring to this world much more change than I ever can. Their pure hearts and their perseverance will push them to always aim higher, while their rural resourcefulness, creativity, and humility will allow them to achieve their dreams. Their bright eyes and innocent smiles brought me warmth and comfort in a town so new and so remote, but also made me confident that what we were doing may change our lives ever so slightly, but will change the lives of these children forever.