

# International Volunteer Opportunity Shapes a Budding Career

By Becky DeCoursey

**R**yan Maldonado, ATC, EMT, wakes up to the intense buzz of his alarm clock, watches the morning news on a television and gets in his very own car to drive to work at Strath Haven High School, where he is the athletic trainer.

He uses a cell phone regularly, eats peanut butter, attends professional sporting events and would think nothing of spending upwards of \$30 for a cab ride across town. This is the typical way of life, right?

Until a few months ago, Maldonado would have agreed, but a recent 11-week trip to Peru changed that. In an effort to gain new professional experiences, help others and learn about different areas of the world, Maldonado decided to immerse himself in the Peruvian culture by volunteering his time and services to the country. He lived with Peruvian families in Trujillo and Cusco while teaching English to Peruvian school children, tending to patients in a geriatric clinic and providing athletic training services to a Peruvian Division I soccer team.

“It was an experience of a lifetime,” Maldonado says. “My favorite part about the experience was being appreciated for the little things.”

## little things

In May, after many months of planning, Maldonado arrived in Peru. His suitcase was packed to the brim with life’s necessities and his mind was waiting to be filled with new experiences. Maldonado had done his research: talked to other volunteers who had been in Peru, taken time to brush up on his Spanish skills – well, at least enough to convey a simple request for directions – and even read a few books.

However, no book could prepare him for this experience.

“I lived with a Peruvian host family that took me under their wing and treated me like their own son,” Maldonado beams. “It was amazing to see how they lived. Not one person I knew had their own car. Everyone took the bus or minivans, which cost only about 11 cents in American money.



A health care practitioner in Peru treats a geriatric patient.

“There was no phone where I lived and only one TV that did not get many stations,” he recounts. “They had never even tried peanut butter.”

The lack of technological advances did not bother Maldonado. He didn’t sign up for 11 weeks of lounging around. Maldonado’s real intent was to gain professional experiences that would aid him in his career in the United States. He was pleasantly surprised when he learned that in addition to being taught about the Peruvian culture, his new jobs would allow him to teach about his own.

## pupil becomes teacher

When Maldonado first told a group of Peruvian school children he would be their new English teacher, they wasted no time asking him questions about American culture. They wanted to know how tall were the buildings in the United States? What did their names really sound like in English? How fast do cars go? Simple questions, but ones he had never considered before.



Ryan Maldonado (right) enjoys the company of newfound friends and coworkers during an exchange experience in Peru.

"You don't think about these things when you are in America," Maldonado says. "Being able to teach them about our culture was one of the most rewarding experiences of the trip. They only had seen us in movies and were just fascinated at simple things, like how different their names sounded in English."

Maldonado expected to note big differences when it came to language, but he thought surely when he arrived to perform his athletic training duties with the soccer team he would be back in familiar territory. After all, an athletic trainer is an athletic trainer, right?

Wrong.

From Maldonado's first day with the soccer team he realized athletic training is not the same around the world

"Athletic trainers in Peru call themselves physiotherapists," Maldonado explains. "At first I called myself an 'entrenador deportivo' (athletic trainer), but in Spanish this means 'trainer of athletes' or coach. When I changed cities, the new school had me teach gym class for two days, and then I figured it out. I began saying I was a 'physiotherapist with a specialty in sports.'"

The differences don't stop there.

"When I worked with the soccer team in the first city, [their health care provider] didn't use any ice, he didn't have an ice machine or realize why I would even use ice to treat players," said Maldonado in disbelief. "The physiotherapist didn't

tape any soccer players; he didn't even have any tape on him."

Another thing that left Maldonado in awe was the freedom sports medicine professionals have in Peru.

"He could give prescription medication or injections without a doctor's note," Maldonado said. "It did not bother me because you could tell that the team had total confidence in his abilities and in what he was doing."

Differences aside, Maldonado did his best, through broken Spanish, to introduce some of his knowledge to the team. Maldonado taught them the importance of a regular stretching routine and even got them to realize that heat and skin creams aren't suited for all injuries.

"After a couple of days they brought in a cooler and we started using ice," he added proudly.

### another journey

After three weeks and having imparted some of his knowledge on the city of Trujillo, Maldonado transferred to Cusco, where he would remain for the rest of his trip. He would work in a geriatric clinic, teach in a new classroom and live with a new family.

Having greatly improved his Spanish skills in the first three weeks, Maldonado was able to make deeper connections and form stronger relationships, especially with his patients at the geriatric clinic.

"Working in the geriatric clinic was my fondest memory of my entire trip," Maldonado says. "One of the first things I did with my geriatric patients was introduce very simple rehab programs to them. The day I came into the clinic and saw my patients performing these exercises and even teaching them to one and other was one of my favorite moments."

"They were appreciative that someone from the United States would come and volunteer for them," Maldonado adds. "They knew I had everything I needed back in the United States and couldn't believe I would leave it all to come help them... but that was what I had come for."

### how to work abroad

Various organizations can help you plan for a volunteer trip abroad. Maldonado used Global Crossroad ([www.globalcrossroad.com](http://www.globalcrossroad.com)), a group dedicated to initiating grassroots projects in developing countries.

Organizations such as Global Crossroad have a group of designated contact members in each host country who set up various volunteer projects. Initially, the organization serves as a liaison between the volunteer and the host country.

Global Crossroad will help coordinate the volunteer projects. They speak with host countries to determine where volunteers can provide the most assistance, and then they will help volunteers contact the appropriate people. Global Crossroad compiles a list of other people who have volunteered in the country you're visiting – and then it's up to each individual to do his/her own research. Maldonado's best advice: TAKE INITIATIVE!

With Global Crossroad, volunteers must raise money to cover travel, organizational fees, expenses and a stipend for host families. Maldonado said he raised money by obtaining support from his church, family, employer and colleagues.



**journal excerpts***May 29, 2005*

Before I arrived here I told people that my Spanish was OK. I have since changed my mind – my Spanish is bad. At first the people were speaking so fast it just sounded like one long sound, and I couldn't tell one word apart from another – kind of like if you tried to learn English by going to an auctioneer.

In the cities there is much poverty. The people do whatever they can to earn money, most of the time just making up jobs. There are many small stands that sell fruit or newspapers or candy. The ratio of taxis to cars is at least 50:1 in the city. Today we took a taxi to the beach, a ride of 20 minutes, and it cost 8 soles, or \$2.25 total, for everyone. Gas is about \$4 a gallon, so I don't know how the taxis make any money. I feel guilty when we haggle over the fare before we leave. I mean, in reality we're arguing over quarters for a ride that in the U.S. would cost \$35.

*June 14, 2005*

The school has no lights, and the students must pay for all their photocopies. They don't have textbooks, either, but they do have small journals and folders where they keep photocopies, if they can afford them. The teacher told me today that she makes 900 Nuevo Soles a month, or about \$290 dollars. Her job is considered upper middle class, too!

The people in Trujillo have been very good to me. They work hard here but earn very little. The work week is Monday – Saturday, and typically a person works 10-12 hours a day. Religion is very big here. Whenever my bus passes by a church, around half of the bus says a quick prayer under their breaths and crosses themselves.

*July 15, 2005*

While the scenery and history here in Cusco are spectacular, it's the people, both Peruvians and other volunteers, who have made this experience amazing. I've made some very good friends here, and it has been very hard to say goodbye to them as they return to their countries. It will also be hard to leave here on August 6, because I have grown quite close to my host family. Back in the U.S. I haven't gotten to see my own family as much as I'd like in the past two years, so having a family here to come back from work to and converse with has been better than any ruins or mountains I have seen. **mm**