



October 2008 Update

Spotlight on Devang Amin '08, Teacher and Ecofiltro Fellow, Parramos, Guatemala

My work with the Valle de los Pinos School is largely unsupervised, which I knew going into this fellowship, as I am the first PiLA fellow there and the school has a very small administration. With little guidance in Guatemala, I have had the mixed blessing of choosing how to divide my efforts. My work now involves a combination of teaching at the school and engineering consulting for Ecofiltro, a nonprofit organization that manufactures water filters made by using clay, sawdust, and colloidal silver. It has been enriching to use my science background at Ecofiltro while developing an entirely new skill set while teaching teenage students.

I have been developing documentation of the process used by Ecofiltro so that other NGOs may start their own factories using its model. I am also examining methods by which the production could be made more efficient. I have had the opportunity to speak with the inspirational Guatemalan inventor of these filters, Fernando Mazariegos, whose model has also been used by Potters for Peace. Ecofiltro now seeks funding to increase its production of filters by building a larger factory.

In contrast to my comfort at Ecofiltro, I entered teaching with little ability to deal with students' disciplinary or motivational issues. Since then, I have managed to make some of my most misbehaved students into a few of my better ones. Unfortunately, many aspects of the school present obstacles to learning. For example, there are no books for the students, a problem I hope to partially remedy by organizing materials from fellow English teachers at other schools in the area. Finding this situation a bit frustrating, not least because it is very hard to make an impact in such an under-furnished school, I decided that I could help my students by offering one-on-one tutoring outside of school. This work inspired me to try to set up a school in this area in which volunteers could teach English, math, and science while learning Spanish from local instructors if necessary. I have already found the Spanish teachers and a building for the school. Ideally, volunteers would sustain the project by paying for the experience, but more funding may be required in its early phases. I realize that there is a lot of work to be done on this project, but I already have the backing of several community leaders and some organizational support from people in the U.S.

I was really lucky to be granted a homestay with a wonderful man who is a community leader here in Parramos. He has shown me around and made lots of helpful introductions within the community. Daily life dramatically differs from that in America, and I have witnessed some interesting cultural practices and ceremonies. Perhaps the grandest event I have seen here was Parramos' Independence Day parade. Few classes met at Valle de los Pinos for close to two weeks as students prepared. Although I was initially unsure of why so much class time was wasted, I soon realized how much pride the people of Parramos take in the annual celebration, one of the few shirt-and-tie events of the year. As is customary, a group students and teachers from Valle de los Pinos travelled the weekend before the parade, via chartered chicken bus, to the ceremonial Independence Day fire in Quetzaltenango. The next day, the group ran a torch from there back to Parramos in a relay—similar to the handling of the Olympic flame. **Continues on p.2**

Devang's report, continued...

The procession itself consisted entirely of local schools, each of which came with a student band. My school's proud musicians were disappointed to earn second place in Parramos. In front of the band, majorettes danced in uniforms. Leading the pack in a rare celebration of academic excellence, five of the best students in the school held flags of the Central American countries that gained their independence that day. The school's director insisted that the group learn various marching formations, making the event far more competitive and less fun for these unlucky few. At the rear marched a few rows of students in costumes representing various people of Guatemala. (The "blackface" paint on the Garifuna would undoubtedly have led to some legal action in the US.) The spectacular demonstration in the midst of such limited resources—the band never saw sheet music—at least partially made up for the many hours of lost class time. After the morning parade, a lunch complete with alcoholic drinks was held in the town hall for teachers. Many exercise a bit less self-restraint than usual on Independence Day.

I have become increasingly comfortable in my new surroundings. By continuing my work, I hope to inspire my students to continue learning while I help to make clean water more affordable and available. Taking a broader view, I have begun to understand how much work is required for the development of a country. A lot of infrastructure has to be built, even if on a small scale, the way that Ecofiltro is approaching the problem of clean drinking water. While short-term volunteer stints are helpful, I have seen that it is really longer term service work that effects the greatest changes. As a result, I also hope to remain involved with Parramos and Ecofiltro in some form after this year.



Devang and his Spanish Teacher above Antigua, Guatemala.



Towers at Tikal

Saludos from PiLA Alumni

Adam Abelson '05, writes to tell us that: I'm now in New York at NYU Law, where I'm in my second year (I transferred from Berkeley). I also got married this summer, to Laura Ginsberg '05. This past summer I worked at the U.S. Department of Justice in the Office of Special Investigations. OSI prosecutes people suspected of war crimes and other human rights abuses abroad who then entered the U.S. Until recently they only were authorized to prosecute Nazi war criminals; since 2004 they now prosecute people from any country suspected of human rights abuses. I assisted in legal research and in developing several of the post-WWII cases. My experience as a PiLA fellow with Human Rights Watch was indispensable, both for securing the position and for understanding the broader context of international human rights prosecutions. This was particularly the case since I spent most of my time in Chile assisting HRW in advocating for Chile to extradite former Peruvian president Fujimori to Peru to stand trial for human rights abuses. I continue to be tremendously grateful to PiLA for having made possible my experience in Chile.

Sarah Schaeffer '06

I'm finishing up my master's in international development studies at GW this year. The exciting part of that is my Capstone project, which is a team effort to research a topic, partner with a client, and actually implement and evaluate a project in partnership. My group is focusing on Prevention for Positives - providing family planning services to HIV-positive individuals in resource-poor settings, as more and more people gain access to antiretrovirals worldwide with the enormous amount of funding that is being poured into the HIV/AIDS effort. We're still early in the game, so no client yet, but we're hoping to travel to an African country site for the project. I've also decided to diverge a bit from my original career path; I have begun the post-bach work so that I can apply to med school, but that is about three years in coming. The idea is to combine the MA in international development studies (concentration in global health) with the MD (once all loans have been repaid!!!) to ultimately work for the World Health Organization and various other organizations, such as Medecins Sans Frontieres or Smile Train.



Tim Cheston '08, Dominican Literacy Project, getting ready to cook a fresh red snapper dinner for him and Emilie Aguirre '08, also a DLP Fellow.

Photos from the Field



Jason Diggs '08, ProPeru Fellow, with some community partners, in Poques, Peru



Meredith Wilensky, Wash. U. '08, Amazon Conservation Association, teaching local youth about wildlife conservation on Science Saturday.