



# VOLUNTEERING IN VILLA EL SALVADOR, PERU

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## Location: Lima, Peru

Peru, seated on the west coast of South America, is renowned for its great biodiversity including coastal beaches, deserts, Amazonian jungles, urban cities, and the Andes mountains. Its culture derives from a rich history stretching back from the ancient Incas to the current day.

Lima is the capital and largest city of Peru and is a mostly metropolitan city surrounded by shantytown communities. Lima experienced a surge in population in the late 1980's to 1990's when many countryside and Andean peoples migrated to the city for more economic opportunity and to flee attacks of the terrorist group the Shining Path. The population growth was so large and sudden that the city is still working to find housing and provide services to all the people of Lima as well as struggling with social difficulties associated with the influx.



Villa El Salvador is one of the communities founded by families migrating from the countryside to the city. Described as one of the most successful shantytowns in modern history the first families settled in the desert and grew their community rapidly. Despite having excellent internal community organization, the town remains impoverished and lacks many services.

## About my special studies

I volunteered through the agency Cross Cultural Solutions and was placed at a field site in Lima based on the community's immediate needs. I sought to learn how social workers can take global experience and integrate lessons learned abroad into their local practice.

## Volunteer Placement:

My volunteer site in Villa El Salvador was called INABIF, an governmental organization dedicated to the welfare of the poorest sectors of Peruvian society.

My role:

- Assist the teacher in the 3 y/o classroom with daily lessons and activities
- Introduce children to basic English words (singing songs, practicing shapes and colors)
- Assist and encourage children to eat at breakfast, snack time, and lunch (This was of absolute importance as some of the children would likely have no meals at home)
- Plan and teach crafts to senior citizens of INABIF to maintain fine motor skills twice a week

## Skills developed

-Cross lingual communication:

I knew very little Spanish when I arrived in Peru and found that I had to learn how to communicate effectively through more than my words

-Patience:

Working in an environment where one knows little of the culture and language can be confusing and exhausting. Improving my patience allowed me to relax and really listen to what the community needed.

-Initiative:

Often, I was given no instruction at my volunteer site. As time passed I found it best to just jump in and offer my own ideas

-Further development of cultural humility:

With all the discussion social workers have about cultural competence, it's easy to think we've got it down. However, being in a foreign culture helped me see what an ongoing process development of this skill is as there is always more to learn!

## Connections

-Classroom:

SW 623: Interpersonal Practice with Families: Understanding the different roles families play within various cultures

SW 605 Infant and Child Development and Behavior: Knowing what were the most important needs to meet for children based on their developmental stages

-SW 709 Intergroup Dialogue for facilitating Social Justice: Being able to recognize my own privileged identities as an American abroad

-SW 628 Interpersonal Practice with Adults: Seeing first hand that above all things it is the personal relationship we offer clients that makes the most difference

-Careers:

This special studies gave me the opportunity to broaden my perspective of the field of social work and explore it within a global context. I was able to think critically to consider the questions I wanted to pursue and am certain I will be able to use skills developed in my future endeavors as a professional.

## Lessons Learned

-Start where the client or community is at! There were many things I initially thought could help the people of Villa El Salvador but quickly learned they did not fit with what the people thought they needed or wanted.

-Human connections matter most: After all the time, what seemed to mean the most to the people I worked with was not any of the skills I brought to my placement but the fact that I was there, that I had taken time away from my life and home to spend time with them.

-The help you provide may not meet the vision you had... and that's okay: It can be hard to let go of the goals you had set out to accomplish, but when you do you will see the true value and meaning of your efforts.



## Advice

If you're thinking about a global social work experience...Go for it! You need not have future plans to practice international social work; it is an invaluable experience for any social worker. Personally, it has added great depth and richness to my social work education that I could have never found in a classroom.

If you decide to go, keep a journal while there, write down everything and embrace the unpredictable!

Accept that you may not fully understand the importance or value of your work until you're finished.



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