



Lessons for the Teacher

Explorer Award
Recipient Enriches
Her Curriculum
From Trip to Peru
and Brazil

By Leslie Bennett

I chose to travel to the South American countries of Peru and Brazil for my Catherine Miller Explorer Award from the Stanley Foundation. My goal was to experience native cultures of the continent—both ancient and current—and investigate how they are alike or different from North American native cultures. Through this journey, I learned how history and geographic landscapes contribute to the identity of a region and shape the people who live there today.

Leslie Bennett is an exceptional Muscatine elementary school teacher and winner of the 2015 Stanley Foundation Catherine Miller Explorer Award. She chose for her award travel a trip to Peru and Brazil, and tells firsthand the lessons of the world she learned from her trip and that she will now pass on to her students.

It was interesting to learn how different cultures evolved based on their geographic locations. For instance, the Andean people had very different cultures, traditions, and holidays than the people of the Amazon because of the Andeans' Quechuan heritage.

Although I thought I had done my research prior to my arrival, I learned more than I thought possible from the people who live there. It was so interesting to talk to people from the area and learn through their firsthand experiences, stories, and traditions. This was so much more powerful than simply reading about a faraway culture.

I learned quite a bit about the Quechuan culture, in particular, what many of us mistakenly refer to as the Incan people. I learned that "Incan" refers only to the kings and royalty of the Quechuan society. It is interesting that this culture is making a comeback and has really reclaimed the Sacred Valley of Peru. The Quechuan flag flies proudly next to the flag of the city of Cuzco at every corner and church. This seems quite different than the situation of Native American cultures in North America. After some contemplation, I can

only guess that this resurgence of the Quechuan culture is a result of the fact that most Quechuan people were forced into slavery in the gold mines after the invasion of the Spanish, rather than exterminated.

In addition, this trip taught me that it is vital that we continue to promote efforts to preserve heritage sites around the world. A variety of climates and geographical structures impact how different groups of people live. The ancient ruins of Machu Picchu and the surrounding valley offer preserved stories of the Quechuans' everyday lives in the mountains. Meanwhile, the people of the Amazon River basin are continually affected by deforestation from trade,



Photos by Leslie Bennett



school in the center of beautiful Cuzco was littered with discarded desks, now overgrown with vines.

There were cultural differences with schools as well. I found it interesting that many students in Cuzco go to school in shifts so they can help their parents with work in family-owned shops. Students came and went at all times during the day and night in various colors of uniforms. My hotel was across the street from the historic Colegio San Francisco de Borja, and I even heard the school band rehearsing at about 1 a.m. one night. It was interesting that the color of the students' uniforms indicated which shifts the students attended.

Surprisingly, I also learned a lot from my fellow travelers. I traveled with people from all over the world: India, Scotland, Argentina, Australia, Canada, Hong Kong, Bulgaria, and America. It was interesting traveling with people from so many countries. We shared stories and got to know one another quite well. Although I was visiting South America, I feel that I learned so much about many other cultures through my travel companions.

mining, logging, and agriculture. The Guarani of Brazil and Argentina also continually struggle with the deforestation of their lands, therefore threatening their culture. Luckily, portions of the Guarani's land have been preserved within the national parks surrounding Iguassu Falls.

Farming Along the Amazon

One of my favorite experiences was my visit to an Amazonian farm. Directly along the river is the farm of a man named Manuel. He lives alone and farms the three hectares (over seven acres) himself. A tour of the farm showed several fruit trees—orange, starfruit, avocado, coconut, papaya, and banana—as well as cocoa and coffee plants and much more. All of his produce supplies the locals with a variety of food. It was a valuable experience to see how this small, local farm compares to many of the large, sponsored/co-op farms in the United States and gave me some perspective on how an average person lives and works in this region.

Furthermore, my visit gave me a perspective I could have gained only by traveling to developing countries. It made me thankful for government services that I would normally take for granted, such as trash removal and animal shelters. Trash litters the streets in mountainous heaps—especially outside the city centers—and stray pets wander the streets of the cities in enormous numbers. On a walk, I was surprised to see that the back courtyard of a prestigious private



It is important for all people to have the opportunity to travel to places where people live lives so different from our own. It gives us perspective and appreciation for all walks of life. As a teacher, it taught me to be more understanding of students and the growing number of cultures that are represented in our schools everyday. I hope to bring these cultural differences and similarities to the students of Muscatine, Iowa, and help to foster in them the same appreciation and empathy for others from different cultures that I now have. I want to help students see the bigger picture and how we are only one piece of a larger, global puzzle.