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# GW Students Abroad

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When most job descriptions say “other duties as assigned,” they usually mean the occasional copy/print job. As a Community Coordinator working with [Sacred Valley Health](#) in Ollantaytambo, Peru, my “other duties as assigned” have included: making a baby doll out of a water bottle to demonstrate the infant Heimlich maneuver; helping to cook dinner with a community health worker in a high Andean village; and Sharpie-ing wounds on my arm for practice sessions treating cuts and burns. No one day is the same as the next, or even remotely predictable, but my work with Sacred Valley Health allows me to work within a fascinating welcoming culture every day in meaningful, creative ways.



Ollantaytambo is a small town built on the footprint of an Inca city in the Andes. Halfway between Cusco and Machu Picchu, Ollantaytambo is a study in contrasts: tourists (and their money) flow through the town in high season, but the people of the surrounding rural communities rarely see the benefits of this industry. They often face poverty, poor health outcomes, and a lack of easily accessible resources, such as cell service and nearby government health clinics. Additionally, many cultural health practices are not necessarily evidence-based or adhere to Western medical standards.

Sacred Valley Health works with thirteen indigenous Quechua communities surrounding Ollantaytambo, each of which elects one to six mostly female community health workers (promotoras) to undergo a year of monthly trainings on curriculum that targets the region's most significant health challenges. For example, many rural children are malnourished, so we focus on balanced diet and the benefits of breastfeeding; a leading cause of death in the area is respiratory illness, so we talk about when a cough needs to be treated by a doctor. After they master a topic, promotoras conduct house visits in their own communities, both teaching preventative health topics and treating basic illnesses and wounds.



My job at Sacred Valley Health (also known by our Quechua name Ayni Wasi, or House of Reciprocity) is centered on the promotoras: I am responsible for reviewing curriculum with them, evaluating their mastery of health concepts, and working with them in our trainings. This sounds simple, but you never know what might happen: anything from simple logistical crossed wires and communication breakdowns to region-wide strikes and transit shutdowns. These challenges also make the successes, like the moment a promotora grasps a health concept, all the more exciting—one promotora found success distinguishing between food groups by mentally linking them with the animals on her farm, associating vitamin-rich vegetables with the herbivore guinea pigs she raises.

Working in an uncertain environment has taught me the necessity of accepting sudden changes in plans and thinking on my feet. In a developing country where people may live hours from reliable transportation and government health clinics, I have the unique opportunity to challenge my own privileges and thinking, and have developed a deep appreciation for ingenuity in the face of lacking resources.

On the other side of culture shock and language barriers lays the relationships I've built with my promotoras. They are strong, capable, dedicated women who approach difficult health topics with positivity and passion, and I admire them endlessly. SVH's programming is designed with social justice and sustainability in mind; power and information is placed in the hands of the promotora, and thus the people and communities we serve. It's been an honor, both personally and professionally, to see them gain confidence as health authorities and leaders to become agents of change in their villages. An important thing to know is that the promotoras are the agents of change in our model, not me. If I'm doing my job right, people in the communities should look at me and ask, "what is that gringa doing here?" It's a more responsible and sustainable approach, and I don't think I could work for an organization where the philosophy was any different.

Seeking a job opportunity abroad is a fantastic choice for anyone interested in pushing their own boundaries and gaining incredible exposure to how public health practice works on the ground. Despite, and often because of, the challenges of my work in Ollantaytambo, I've grown and learned from promotoras in unique ways that only a job in another country could provide, and am making lifelong cross-cultural friendships along the way.

Interested in discovering more opportunities with Sacred Valley Health?  
Visit their website at <http://sacredvalleyhealth.org/what-we-do/university-partnerships/>.