

Into the Andes and Back Again: Honors Goes to Peru

—By Dr. Sandy Feinstein

During spring break 2006, seventeen students from three Penn State campuses, Penn State faculty from two campuses, and one natural history museum curator set out for Peru as part of the course, *Spanish 296H: Andean Cultures: Past and Present*.

Before visiting the chosen archeological and historical sites, students read about the history and religion of the Andes. The goal, like that of the National Endowment of the Humanities Institute attended by Professor Emilio del Valle Escalante the year before, was to offer our students the deeper exposure to Andean and indigenous cultures and histories that experiential learning within a country ideally provides. Professor Emilio del Valle Escalante, Penn State Lehigh Valley, and Professor Sandy Feinstein, Penn State Berks, organized this class that would culminate in exploring the Sacred Valley of Peru.

After returning from Peru, the students wrote papers in which they compared their own experience with those described in the testimonial narrative, *Andean Lives: Gregorio Condori Mamani and Asunta Quispe Huamán* (1977).

The experience also offered Penn State students the opportunity to explore archeological sites and to have discussions about the history of the Andean world. But beyond this objective, it allowed students to experience cultural exchanges with Andean subjects. Such cultural exchange resulted in students facing a reality that encouraged a sense of social consciousness, as expressed in some of their testimonials.

Alex Civil, a first-year Berks student from Haiti planning to major in political science, addresses the way personal experience informs perception when he writes, “The trip to Cuzco, Peru was an extraordinary experience because it provided me the opportunity to learn more about the Andean’s culture and their way of living. This experience reminded me of the living conditions most people experience in a third world country such as my homeland in Haiti. For most tourists, visiting a place where the poverty level is below marginal is a shocking experience, but for those whom have experienced life in a less privileged country as is in my case, it is simply a vivid reflection of a personal experience.”

Mike Lewis, a first-year English major at Berks, noted by contrast, “I

did not have to face any of the daily struggles that Peruvians face every [day], especially over things such as transportation, lodging, and money.”

Recognizing these struggles, Kim Beall, a junior Berks Schreyer Scholar majoring in elementary education, wrote, “As I sped off towards one of the most sacred Incan sites, and probably the largest tourist attraction in Peru [Macchu Picchu], I glanced out the window of the rushing train to the bowed back farmers and their mates planting and sowing their livelihood. This stark contrast in our ways of living, as my seatmates and I all lipsynched along with our iPods, was the sheer unfairness of it all. At one point I tore my headphones off and watched in silence as the train allowed me a fishbowl-like view of the countryside folk in Peru.”

In a concluding reflection, Nicole Stettler, a sophomore Berks Schreyer Scholar and political science/theatre major, remembers a conversation on the train, “I recall a conversation Emilio and I had had during the train ride to Machupicchu when I asked if he thought that the Andean people resented the tourists or valued them for their business. We discussed the benefits and the disadvantages of tourism within the country, conclud-

ing that their presence in Peru is somewhat of a mixed blessing.

Perhaps, by shedding light on the existing social stratification, tourists will be able to lessen the discrimination. Obviously, the money that we bring into the country is positive and will contribute to the wellbeing of the country, but by changing our attitudes, tourists can begin to change general views of indigenous people. Instead of thinking selfishly, the privileged tourists could ask the Andeans what they think a fair wage is instead of continuing to argue and barter. Perhaps ending the social discrimination that has been plaguing Peru for centuries would be worth that extra dollar or two.”

Still, Dan Barnhardt, a first-year Berks history major, could end his journal after the plane touched back down in New York with enthusiastic final notes, “— Great times —Time of my life — Peru is Amazing.”

This course on Andean Culture Past and Present was not about personal guilt, but rather understanding other realities, histories, and life experiences. It was about thinking and reflecting upon what we saw and experienced, as students, teachers, and, most importantly, perhaps, as human beings. ■