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A Snapshot of Life in Peru

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A snapshot of life in Peru



Katelyn Henson '15

Taking a photo is more than just capturing a moment for Katelyn Henson '15.

It is documenting a different way of life that can be shared with others and valued for its differences.

Henson, a Linfield College mass communication and anthropology double major from Camas, Wash., spent last summer in Peru documenting the North Peruvian Ethnobotany Project (NPEBP), which is researching curandismo, a traditional North Peruvian medical system using medicinal plants and rituals in healing. NPEBP is an ongoing multi-institutional, multidisciplinary study of the medicinal properties and uses of the many plants to cure many ailments that Peruvians might normally cure with Western medicine.

The project is a mix of medical anthropology – collecting knowledge of ancient peoples as well as current

practices and understandings – and studying the biological and chemical effectiveness of the plants in the lab. The work has helped Peruvians become more knowledgeable about traditional medicines, and may benefit those who cannot afford expensive Western cures.

One of the project's goals is to share information with a wider Peruvian audience and expand production so these plants can be domestically grown, help stimulate local economies, and provide cheaper, healthier alternatives to Western pharmaceuticals.

Henson learned about the project from Tom Love, professor of anthropology and coordinator of Latin American studies at Linfield. Although five other Linfield students have participated in the past, Henson was the only Linfield student involved this year, joining students from across the U.S. Henson worked under the direction of Love and Douglas Sharon, the former director of both the San Diego Museum of Man and the Phoebe Hearst Museum of Anthropology at the University of California at Berkeley.

Henson served as photographer on the project, documenting the work of students in the laboratories and anthropologists in the field to create a better record of traditional curandismo and native farming practices. In addition to helping with the fieldwork, she is also creating a much-needed website and an online presence for the project.

As a photographer, Henson was able

to capture aspects of everyday Peruvian life and step out from behind her lens to experience it as well. At one point, she volunteered in a local clinic in Huanchaco, the beach town where she lived.

"Initially, it was really hard for me to find things to talk about with the patients. However, as I learned the language and became more comfortable in the environment, I began to enjoy it," said Henson.

Linfield helped prepare Henson for work in Peru by providing her with a well-rounded education. She specifically pointed to Amy Orr, the George A. Westcott III Distinguished Professor of Sociology; Susan Currie Sivek, assistant professor of mass communication; Brad Thompson, associate professor of mass communication; Love and Sharon for helping her discover an interest in higher education.

"Rather than specializing in one field, I have been able to take Spanish, ethnobotany, photography and anthropological methods courses – all of which come from different departments," she said. "This experience helped me prepare for my professional life."

After graduation, Henson hopes to attend graduate school and study gender and media studies within a sociology Ph.D. program. Her goal is to one day work as a sociology professor at a liberal arts school similar to Linfield.

katelynhenson.wordpress.com

– Alyssa Townsend '15

