

Much harder than arriving

Life lessons for an SIM short-termer

by Clare McBrien



'It's like being in "The Wacky Races", Clare!' My mother, who had come for a visit, had perfectly described the everyday experience I'd become to accustomed to. I'd forgotten how terrifying the traffic in Lima is when you first arrive.

When I'd accepted the short-term mission to go and help SIMers Bill and Jean Williamson in the Peruvian shanty towns of Huaycan and La Campiña, I had no idea of the highs and lows I was letting myself in for. My romantic ideas of missionary life in Peru were rudely shattered when I landed in Lima.

Staring out of the taxi window, exhausted and grumpy, the smell of pollution and dirt combined hit me — along with the sound of blaring car horns — and I realised: Lima is not romantic! It is humid and dusty. I was going to have to live in this massive, polluted, chaotic city for a year!

It was not easy to get used to the *combis asesinos*, (local buses that would be consigned to the scrap heap at home), to communicate with my limited Spanish, or to cope with regular bouts of food poisoning. But God made it very clear — as soon as I stepped foot in Huaycan — that I was meant to be there, and that He would be faithful.

In my home church in Glasgow we often sing a song asking God to 'break my heart for what breaks yours'. Until now, I have never fully understood the warning 'be careful what you pray for'. My short-term year has been one of having my heart completely broken for the children, teenagers and adults I've met here. My sense of injustice and helplessness, mixed with an overpowering love for these people, has often led to a feeling of despair. One of the most difficult lessons I've had to learn is how to love people, as Jesus loves us, and then to walk away from them at the end of the day, entrusting them to God's hands.

Instead of trying to describe to you the poverty I have seen, I will tell you a couple of stories, many of which seem to be repeated over and over again in the lives of children here.

Estephania and Katty

Three-year-old Estephania is usually one of the first to arrive at the feeding and education project held in the church in Huaycan. She is always dirty, with a runny nose, ill-fitting clothes and unkempt hair. Her mother leaves her to the care of her eight-year-old sister, Katty, who can only look after her when she gets back from school. If she needs the toilet, she goes in the street, as her house is very high up on the steep mountainside. Katty, who has repeated primary one twice, can barely read and write and gets frustrated easily with her homework.

One day Estephania refused to go home at the end of the project, so I walked with her. She led me past aggressive dogs, along a cliff edge, up very steep steps and eventually past more aggressive dogs and down even steeper steps to her three-roomed house, where she lives with her mother and four siblings. Her mother, surprised that I had walked her home, told me she was quite capable of walking home by herself.

One-third of Lima's nine million inhabitants live in these houses constructed of cane, with dirt floors, no electricity and often no running water.

Maria and Oscar

Maria lives in La Campiña, where I help at a project for mothers and their children under age five. I do activities with the children, while the mothers receive practical, emotional and spiritual teaching. One day Maria arrived with what looked like burns on her face. They were infected and bleeding and she was in a lot of pain. While trying to help her wash the sores, we found what looked like cigarette burns over her arms and legs. It was hard not to jump to the conclusion that her father had abused her, as is too often the case. However, her mother denied this. We then discovered huge, weeping sores on her stomach, back and legs. Her mother had not been able to take her to the doctor, because she couldn't afford the charge of 2 soles. (50p)

Oscar, and many other 13 and 14-year olds, works on the street, selling whatever he can in order to have money for education. On Saturday nights we hold a teenagers' club in Huaycan, so that young people have somewhere to go instead of discos — where drugs and sex are all that is on offer.

God is using the Williamsons to reach out into these communities to teach the local church how to be a light in the darkness by helping children like Estephania and Katty, Maria and Oscar.

God's faithfulness

I now enjoy the 'wacky' bus rides to and from Huaycan, and the bustle and noise of the city. And, I can communicate well in Spanish. God has taught me about his faithfulness every step of the way, constantly providing everything I've needed — from food and friends to emotional and spiritual energy.

The day of my return to the UK will soon be here, and I know that walking away from this difficult yet worthwhile year will be much harder than arriving.

0 comments

- [Add a comment to this page](#)

Learn more

Clare was working with Bill and Jean Williamson in the shanty towns of Lima, if you would like to learn more about this project:

[click here](#)

SIM - Serving in mission © 2012
Built on  OneStopCMS
Key SIM Websites [Switch Language](#)