

Testimonial submitted by Michelle Roy
2011 Co-recipient of the Judith Peters *Aprender ayudando* Spanish Service Award

Christian Cheveri, one of my friends from El Salvador always would tell those who visited that one visit was worth more than any money they could donate. He explained that the experience connected people across cultures and due to their relationships change would actually be possible. This sentiment immediately touched me because after a few days in El Salvador, I was overwhelmed with desire to serve that I never had before even though. These relationships with people who had less than I did, but were so genuine and hospitable ignited a passion in me to change the world. They too benefited from the relationships because they wanted to work with us, rather than receiving handouts. They appreciated that we took the time to visit them and play with their kids rather than coming in and pretending that we had all the answers.

The importance of having strong relationships with those we are serving become more relevant after my summer in Peru. I went with the intention of fabricating water filters in order to help others get clean water. However, after a week there and talking to the director, another volunteer and I realized we needed to do more than that. We received the unfortunate news that in Chichubamba, the most recent community to receive filters, the success rate was low. Many were using the filters sparingly if at all. It became apparent that they were handed the filter without much interaction with the other volunteers so they had no real desire to use them. Another volunteer and I worked to change the distribution process for the rest of the community to change this. In order to learn a little bit about the people before they received the filter, we took the time to learn their names and a little bit about their families and to tell them a little bit about ourselves. Once there was a better foundation of trust, we spent time explaining to them about the importance of clean water and how to use it correctly. They were engaged during our chats and seemed appreciative of the filters. Hopefully these families will benefit from the clean water the filters can provide. Mercedes, the filter director, was thrilled to see how well the families responded to us and was thought the changes we made were essential to the growth of the project. She believed that communicating with the people was the real answer to the problems, rather than the water filter.

These experiences have taught me that before substantial improvement can occur relationships need to be formed, which has made learning Spanish even more important for me. The more Spanish I know the easier it is for me to communicate with those I am trying to help allowing me to form stronger relationships with them. By communicating with them, I can learn from them about what changes they would like to see and then work with them to ensure the changes are implemented and maintained properly. I may have technological knowledge, but without knowing the people in the community, there is no way to implement sustainable solutions.