

## Testimony

Tracie Kirven – 2013 Fund for Teachers Fellow

This past summer, Fund for Teachers & The Ellbogen Foundation made it possible for me to participate in the best professional development experience of my life. With a grant for \$5000.00 and goals of traveling to Perú to experience Peruvian culture first-hand, visiting ancient Incan sites (including Machu Picchu!), learning about the ancient Incan Empire, improving my Spanish, creating a language-exchange inter-school partnership, and bringing back authentic primary sources and materials for my classroom, I packed my bags and embarked on a month-long journey. And what an adventure it was!!

My adventure in Perú began in the capital city of Lima with 5 days to explore the city, visiting the San Francisco Convent, the Basilica Cathedral, the Plaza de Armas, and several museums. I took 2 city tours of Lima, and visited the Temple of Pachacamac on a morning tour. I then traveled by bus to Paracas, Ica, and Nasca on a 1.5 day tour, including a boat tour of the Ballestas Islands, commonly known as the “Galapagos of Perú” and are inhabited by many beautiful tropical species of birds, including penguins, and sea lions. I also enjoyed a private flight over the famous giant geoglyphs, the “Nazca Lines.” Although the flight was bumpy and full of sharp turns, the views were breath-taking and surreal.

On day 6, I flew to Cusco where I met the family with whom I would be living for the following 3 weeks of my adventure. During my time in Cusco, I visited many of the notable attractions and Incan ruins, including Sacsayhuaman, the Incan walls, Qoricancha, Museo Inca, and so much more. I essentially visited *every* site in my “visitor’s handbook” and then sought out more sites and fun things to do from my host family, my new friends, and my professors. I even attended a very sacred Shaman ceremony for the Andean holiday of “Día de la Pachamamá” in the Temple of the Moon with a Cusqueñan friend and guide. I visited art galleries and shopped in local markets, attended a “cultural fiesta” at Ukukus and took in a live theater performance at Asencia, a hip, urban coffee shop for locals. However, I spent much of my time with my new Cusqueñan friends as well as my host family, learning to live as they do to better understand and appreciate the rich culture of Cusco. I traveled to Machu Picchu and Ollantaytambo twice, hiking all 3 major mountains during the 2 trips. On another weekend, I traveled to Tipón, Peru to visit the ancient Incan ruins, fountains, and waterways.

Though some days may have felt like a vacation as I experienced such a rich and dynamic culture, ate incredible Peruvian food at unique local restaurants, and explored the markets and shops of Cusco and its surrounding towns, my fellowship was also a lot of work. During the weekdays, I attended intensive language and culture courses at Ecela Language School in downtown Cusco from 8am until 1pm. I participated in classroom visits or private lessons with one of the professors every day. Then at night, before meeting with friends or enjoying night-time strolls down Avenida de la Cultura or in the Plaza de Armas with my host-family, I diligently completed Spanish homework for my classes, which included essays and reading two novels in Spanish by Ciro Alegría. I found my classes to be rewarding, not only in what I learned as a student, but as an active observer of my Spanish professors. Today I find myself reflecting daily about the various methods that they used to teach key concepts, many of which I have borrowed and adapted for my own classroom.

It is difficult to summarize all the ways in which my Fund for Teachers grant helped me grow as a professional and a teacher because the overall experience changed me so much. My grant allowed me to experience Peruvian culture first-hand so that I can bring details of that culture back to my classroom. My fellowship provided me with opportunities to make new Spanish-speaking connections for both my personal and professional life. My language classes and my total immersion with my homestay improved my Spanish skills and helped to revitalize my passion for teaching and learning Spanish. The various visits I made to museums and ancient archeological sites broadened my content knowledge about the ancient Incan and pre-Incan civilizations. Overall, my fellowship expanded my frame of reference for teaching about culture in general.

Thanks to this fellowship, in my classroom my students are now being exposed to Peruvian culture through lessons I have built around my experiences, authentic materials, pictures, and videos. Students in my Spanish II classes are composing their first "pen-pal" letters to students in Cusco, Peru. Students in my Spanish III & IV classes participated in their first "group Skype" experience with a tour guide from Cusco. Class discussion in my Spanish classroom feels re-invigorated - Students are asking meaningful questions about various topics regarding Peru, comparing and contrasting our countries while seeking connections between our cultures. I have returned from my fellowship so excited about Perú, and students can see my passion for Peruvian culture and traditions as I teach.

I am so grateful to the Ellbogen Foundation and the Fund For Teachers organization for providing me with such a unique professional development opportunity. I have learned and grown so much from my experiences during my fellowship that a simple "thank you" just doesn't seem sufficient. If you are a teacher who is currently considering applying for a fellowship, I urge you.... Do It! Deciding what you most need to improve your teaching and then designing your "dream professional development" around that skill set or knowledge gap can be extremely empowering. So take the risk, set your goals high, and apply!

Thank you for your time.