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THE LONG ROAD TO  
ASA CHAPI

By Sue Regier

The pulse on the flight from Atlanta to Lima is livelier, more social than on USA domestic flights. A cacophony of language and laughter radiates through the air. Excited tourists mingle with home-going Peruvians amid a flurry of settling in for the six-hour flight.

During the long flight, my seatmates are curious and friendly. They ask me why I'm headed to Peru and I explain that I help direct the education program at a school in the highlands – a school called Casa Chapi that Quechua Benefit built for the children of alpaca farmers. The Peruvians understand. They say thank you for helping.

**T**he tourists ask more questions. I tell them the story of how our founder, Mike Safley, came to Peru in the 1990's and imported the first alpacas to the United States. How, after seeing the plight of the Peruvian alpaca farmers – their poverty, the remoteness of their villages in the high Andes, and that the children often lived too far from any school to attend regularly – Mike knew that he had to find a way to help them. I tell them about the long road from 1996 to 2010, when Casa Chapi became a reality. I invite them to visit Casa Chapi if they travel through the Colca Valley, and I hand them my card so they can check out the website.

The midnight arrival in Lima is not the end of the journey. Early the next morning, a Peruvian flight takes me to Arequipa, a smaller city that sits at 7,500 feet elevation in the south of Peru. Nor is that the end of the trip. After resting for a day in Arequipa, I take a four-hour bus ride up and over 16,000-foot Andean peaks to the small village of Chivay. As we manoeuvre down the final S-curves of the road, I see the thatched roofs of the white stucco buildings of Casa Chapi in the distance.

**ROOMS WITH A VIEW**

Casa Chapi Children's Village sits on a beautiful hillside overlooking the spectacular Colca Valley. On the steep hillsides, farmers grow potatoes, quinoa, and maize, and graze alpacas, sheep, cows, and burros on the small fields fenced in by pre-Incan stone walls.

From its humble beginnings in 2010, when 10 children came to live in the casitas so they could attend local schools in Yanque and Chivay, Casa Chapi has grown to include four casitas, a large dining hall, a clinic, a schoolhouse, and a magnificent chapel. More than 70 children now live and learn at Casa Chapi, Quechua Benefit's



Mike Safley on Quechua Benefit's first mission in 1996

prototypical boarding school for children. The children are selected from some of the most remote and impoverished families of Peru based on need.

It is through the efforts of Quechua Benefit's in-country Peruvian director, Alejandro Tejada, that the children make their way to Casa Chapi. In his words, "They are children that if Quechua Benefit had not intervened, they and their families would have had no hope for positive change."

Often it is the resident priest, Padre Marcos, a longtime friend and supporter of Casa Chapi, who points out the most at-risk children in his vast highland parish. Alejandro interviews the families of each of the children, helps them understand



Children at Casa Chapi receive a rigorous academic education

Cristian, a 3rd grade student at Casa Chapi, with his parents Juan and Santusa



“They are children that if Quechua Benefit had not intervened, they and their families would have had no hope for positive change”

Xiena, Casa Chapi's first exchange student, is now living and studying in Bend, Oregon



how living and learning at Casa Chapi could benefit them, and enlists their support in helping the children have a chance at a better future.

As we move into our fourth year of operating the school, we are refining the curriculum and creating new opportunities to ensure the very best experience for the children at Casa Chapi. Moving from memorization, or rote learning methods to an applied, experiential learning philosophy will help the children absorb their lessons in valuable ways. By incorporating mathematics, science, reading, and writing into real world projects, problem solving is a natural outcome and reason for learning those skills.

#### LEARNING ENVIRONMENT

At Casa Chapi, the learning environment includes new greenhouse gardens, animal husbandry, cooking, dance, music, art, and sports – all of which provide rich themes for cross-subject projects. For example, a study of animal husbandry requires knowledge of science and nutrition to determine how to care for and feed the animals, mathematics to figure out how many animals are needed to sustain a community, and language skills to keep records, and write up results of the project. This project could be extended into theatre performance, art projects, and cooking workshops.

For the first time, this year we have six teachers, one for each class year, and a principal who can focus on leading and planning. In March, prior to the new school year, everyone received intensive training in project-based teaching. The Peruvian Ministry of Education is now providing salary for four of our teachers and monthly teacher-training sessions with an expert in project learning. With the increase in teacher coverage, upgraded learning methods, and better planning we look forward to seeing these bright, curious children flourish.

Children participate in a wide variety of extracurricular activities, including soccer



Children often come to Casa Chapi from extremely rural alpaca breeding families



#### PARENTS ASSOCIATION

The parents of Casa Chapi children have formed a Parents' Association that meets one Saturday a month at the school. They discuss their children's progress, attend life skills classes on nutrition and family well-being and to bring a contribution of food or other resources as their circumstances allow.

Last August, we interviewed the parents to make sure we were meeting their expectations, and to ask whether they had questions or concerns about their child's schooling. As they openly stated their hopes, dreams and concerns for their children, it became clear that Quechua parents want their children to enjoy better lives than their current situation permits. They recognize that education will help their children seek a brighter future. Just as these parents of the highlands recognize that their world is changing dramatically through tourism and technology, they also understand, and expressed legitimate concern, that their Quechua language and traditions will disappear because of the growth. As a result, workshops in English and Quechua language and culture were added to the curriculum.

As an additional resource, we've invited USA schools to partner with Casa Chapi to share their knowledge. We are working with Cascades Academy in Bend, Oregon, and Bancroft School in Worcester, Massachusetts, and we plan to eventually have a total of six partner schools both in the US and in other international locations. So far, the partner schools' students have exchanged letters and arts and crafts with Casa Chapi students. Several of their teachers and students have expressed interest in traveling to Peru this year to share computer techniques, project ideas, and language skills with our schoolchildren.



Quechua Benefit created a home in Arequipa to keep our girl graduates in school



The home of Casa Chapi - Arequipa

**GOOD FORTUNE**

Casa Chapi children are the recipients of much good will and generosity, and to help them understand the concept of philanthropy and the importance of 'paying forward' their good fortune, the school also partners with other rural schools in the Colca Valley. Each year, Casa Chapi hosts a three-day Art Camp, inviting the students from schools in some of the poorest surrounding communities, Yanque, Icupampa, and Corporaque, to participate. That means that 140 children create art, make handicrafts, produce puppet plays, dance, sing, and play together for three days of fun and competition – they get to be children.

As Casa Chapi School has grown and matured, so have the children who were the first residents

of the school. In December 2016, ten students graduated from the 6th grade level and were ready to move on to secondary school. It is often difficult for students, especially girls, to continue their education once they return to their family home. Often, these young women become pregnant within a year and begin the endless cycle that is the life of women in the Colca Valley: annual childbirth, care and feeding of family and livestock, and extreme poverty.

Boys who graduate from Casa Chapi have more options to continue their education. Over the past three years, Quechua Benefit has had a working relationship with Don Bosco School for Boys in Arequipa. Four of our most promising young scholars currently board and study at Don Bosco. No similar opportunity is available for girls.

**CASA CHAPI - AREQUIPA**

After considering several options, including building a casita on the Casa Chapi campus to house the young women, we determined that the best way to promote further education for them was to provide a safe environment for them to live in Arequipa, where they could continue their education. Fortunately, Don Bosco school owned a house in Yanahuara, a safe, upscale neighbourhood in Arequipa with access to good public and private schools.

The house was recently donated to the school by a grateful patron and was leasable. With two separate living areas, it was perfect for our children's needs – with the additional benefit of being able to house both girls and boys who wish to further their education in Arequipa.

Casa Chapi - Arequipa has been leased and renovated. Girls and boys who graduate from Casa Chapi -Chivay now have a place to live while attending school in Arequipa. The boys attend Don Bosco School as day students, and the girls enrolled at a public school near the house. The four boys currently boarded at Don Bosco join their classmates on weekends. Two live-in house mothers provide meals and security for the children as they go to school, attend sports clubs, do homework, and make crafts.

Soon these young people will be ready for the next phase of their education. Our hope is that some will go on to university, a few will learn a skill such as carpentry, mechanics or technology. Some may opt to go back home to run the family farm. Regardless, Quechua Benefit will have given them the skills to choose a path out of poverty.

The road to promote education for the children of Peruvian alpaca farmers is not a super highway. It is long and bumpy and full of potholes. Some complications arise over and over, some avenues are dead ends, but the outcome can be life-altering so we look for a detour. We have much work still to do, but the rewards are enormous and the future for these children is bright. The sparkling eyes, wide smiles and warm hugs of greeting when you walk through the gates of Casa Chapi make the long road worthwhile. 🌟

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Dance is among the many activities offered at Casa Chapi art camps