



Redwood students and chaperones were in Puerto Lopez when a 7.8 magnitude earthquake struck Ecuador. TOP: Andres (left) and Ismael (right) are snapped enjoying a mid-day snack. The boys live in Bahia de Caraquez. SECOND: Senior Elly Lundberg poses for a photo with a young boy. THIRD: Junior Tim Peterson holds a boy on his shoulder as Andres and his friend sit on a donkey. BOTTOM: The service group poses with friends from the trip before departing.

EARTHQUAKE IN ECUADOR

A STUDENT SHARES HIS STORY

By Daniel Oh, as told to
Maxime Kawawa-Beaudan

The town of Puerto Lopez faced the ocean on the western coast of Ecuador, a three-hour drive from Quito. A group of students played soccer on the beach, and across a cove from the beach was a mountain; beside it the sun dove for the water. The sky went orange, went green, finally crept toward indigo. Sailboats, fishing boats and canoes stood silhouetted on the ocean, bobbing with the breeze.

Some Redwood students and two teacher chaperones lazed around their hostel, a two-story wooden building hidden by overgrown trees. They sat on swings and hammocks watching the students kick their ball over wet sand, into the surf, sometimes into the waves. The soccer players and spectators had just come back from the street market.

It grew dark—dark enough that the students couldn’t see the ball. They trudged up the beach to the hostel to have dinner and clean up. They’d already packed the night before. Tonight was about savoring their last hours in Ecuador. For many it was nostalgic; they’d made good memories and new friends with students at Fanny De Baird, a high school in the coastal town Bahia de Caraquez: Yair, Luis, Jeicol, July, Yanina and many others. Yair wore his hair long under a baseball cap that he’d bought on a trip to California a year ago. Luis was a surfer with short curly hair. He spoke the best English of the Fanny students.

As the Redwood students reminisced about their times with their new friends, one student, Daniel Oh, was in the shower. He was still there when the earthquake began.

This is their story, as told by Daniel.

The power went out. Someone screamed. ‘It’s just a power outage,’ I thought. Although I couldn’t see anything and was disoriented from the dark, I didn’t shut off the water because I didn’t think much of the outage.

Then I became dizzy. It felt like someone had spun me around 10 times, and the darkness only made the disorientation worse. I put my hands out, holding onto the tiling on the walls. I thought I was fainting. After three seconds, I recognized that it was an earthquake.

The room didn’t shake. It rolled. It sat at the top of a long wave, dipped to its minimum, rose again. I started counting the seconds aloud: One, two, three...

‘I hope a beam doesn’t fall on my head,’ I thought. I should’ve sat down and covered my head, but at the time I was frozen. I was calm, yet I couldn’t think.

When I’d counted 12 seconds, I heard frantic voices moving past the door in the hall. It was impossible to tell in the dark whether the earthquake had passed.

“Is someone in there?” a teacher’s voice called through the door.

“Yes,” I said. I grabbed my towel and opened the door. The hallway was dark. When I stepped outside I was one of the last to arrive on the street. The students were in a huddle on the other side of the road. Groups of two and three consoled each other.

What I remember most amid all of this was my unsettling calm. I wasn’t holding anything back; there was no panic to hold. Wasn’t I supposed to feel something more?

We were lucky enough to be physically untouched. The teachers retrieved our things and loaded us on to a bus at 8 p.m. Originally we had intended to leave Puerto Lopez at 11 p.m. to reach the airport in Guayaquil at 3 a.m. By a stroke of luck, the bus driver happened to be in town when the earthquake hit.

Most of the lights were out in Puerto Lopez and we could see the teachers and GSE leaders outside, gathered in front of the hostel under the orange light of their headlamps.

One of the GSE leaders stepped onto the bus. She gathered our attention and told us that a family who had initially planned to stay at the hostel needed a ride with us. They were in tears, she told us, over their luck in finding a ride.

For the next six hours, we sat on the bus. Our route took us through rough roads strewn with potholes and bumps and debris. Teachers told us that we couldn’t stop the bus under any circumstances. People had to urinate so badly that they began to pee in a bucket.

When we got to the airport, I saw ceiling panels caved in around a support beam. Chairs were in disarray. Trash littered the first floor. Debris had fallen from the second floor to stores on the first. We sat at the airport for at least 10 hours, and together we watched the skyline lighten through the clouds. We stayed in the checking line for four hours; it was there that we found out that the house we had slept at in Bahia, named Casa Gorda, was still standing, but the town had suffered structural damage. One of the leaders started crying when she heard the news. We boarded the plane and left.

Copa Airlines took us to Panama City. We drove from the airport to the Riu Hotel, a five-star hotel. We’d left burnt out lights and tearful families only to find ourselves amid high ceilings, sushi bars, decorative fountains, swimming pools and computer lounges. But I didn’t acknowledge this thought until the group dinner buffet when it entered the forefront of my mind. The 24 of us had left untouched. No scratches, no bruises. The buffet table was laden with fruit, chicken, pork, rice, corn, salads, and we’d left with nothing more than sunburns.

Over the course of the trip, the death toll had jumped from 77 to 200, from 200 to 300. The numbers gnawed at me. One could be Yair. Or Luis. Or any other of our friends. I didn’t feel lucky. I felt guilty for leaving, and at the time, I wished I’d gotten hurt. I wished a log or a beam had fallen on my arm. There would’ve been some justice in it.

During our second day at the hotel, we learned that the Fanny students were unhurt. Some of their homes had been destroyed, including Luis’s. After two nights, we left. At 8:50 a.m., we boarded a plane to San Francisco.

The return to school was tough. I felt a profound lack of purpose. Everybody knew, yet nobody seemed to care. The questions I got were mostly about the earthquake, not about how I felt, or the people we’d left behind. Class seemed unbearable, pointless. People like Luis struggled amid the rubble of their broken homes, fought to find shelter and food; our friends were mired in a disaster zone. Yet we sat in class watching videos, filling out worksheets. Nobody seemed to care.

I wanted people to feel how we felt, to see how much and why we wanted to help.

We came back shaken but unharmed. We made great memories and great friends. We played on beaches in the sunset, planted trees, snorkeled in the Pacific, met with the students from Fanny. We met local children like Javier, the 8-year-old son of one of our mentors, and local seniors like Don Ramon, the 80-year-old who can do 25 push ups on his fists and wields a machete like a warrior.

But we were only ever visitors to that place. The friends we made and the people we met live there. Some will live there for the rest of their lives. And what we do today determines whether they will live in ruin or in comfort.

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The GSE students have set up a GSE donation page at empowered.org. Money will go to the restoration of Bahía de Caraquez, the town in Ecuador where the students stayed. The Redwood student band “Canopy” will also be performing at the Sweetwater Music Hall on June 19 in support of earthquake victims.