

## Her story:

# Teacher delivers school supplies to Amazon River villages



Carol Czajkowski, Power Middle School teacher

BY CAROL CZAJKOWSKI  
SPECIAL WRITER

I peer through the window at the darkness below. A few lights punctuate the landscape. I estimate that I am flying over Central America, but where? Costa Rica? Honduras?

The pilot must be reading my mind because a few minutes later he announces that we are flying over Managua, Nicaragua.

This is one of the first entries in my travel journal. Where am I going? Peru, South America. What is my purpose? To deliver school supplies to villages along the Amazon River.

Last summer I spent a life-changing two weeks living on the Amazon River. There I learned of a program in which schools and individuals in the United States could donate money to buy basic school supplies for the children of the rain forest.

Returning to school in August I approached my principal, Laura Miner, with the idea. She loved it, and our sixth grade took on the task. We held a fund-raising week in February, which the Observer covered with a story and photos.

It was a huge success, and we raised enough money to adopt two schools. This sounds like the end of the story, but fortunately it doesn't end there.

Early in March two students, Kevin Boskey and Maureen McNell, handed me a copy of the Detroit Zoological Society newsletter. One article was titled "Amazing Opportunities Aboard for Volant Volunteers." When I read that the zoo was looking for volunteers to help deliver school supplies to Amazon rain forest schools through the Adopt-A-School program, I couldn't believe my eyes. I thought, "Sign me up!" The timing was perfect. I approached my principal by placing the article in her mailbox with a note that said, "Can we talk about this?"

Volunteering would mean that I would have to be released from my teaching duties for the week, and I wasn't sure what the district policy was regarding an opportunity like this.

Laura Miner thought it sounded like an interesting experience and that the timing was right, but I needed to secure permission through Central Office.

One week later I got the thumbs up! I was permitted to travel to the Amazon rain forest April 16-25. This coincided with the beginning of their school year. I couldn't wait to witness how the money we raised was used. I couldn't wait to see the looks on the Peruvian children's faces.

I booked my tickets with AeroPeru, only to find out later that they had gone bankrupt. I was determined to get there and made a joke about walking if I had to. I found an alternate route through Dallas, Texas, to Lima, Peru, to Iquitos, Peru.

On Saturday, April 17, after boarding three planes and 10-12-hours flying time, I arrived in Iquitos, but the trip was not over yet. I had to travel another 100 miles by boat to get to the ExplorNap camp where our home base would be for the week. This is on the Napo River, a tributary of the Amazon.

I learned on the three-hour boat trip that we would be visiting 16 of the 38 adopted schools. Tamanco, one of Power Middle School's adopted schools, would be among them.

Amner, our Peruvian guide for the week, grew up in Tamanco. I couldn't believe how well everything was working out.

Here is how I spent my week:

■ Saturday, April 17 - I arrive at the ExplorNap camp tired but ready to work. After all, I am not here to "see the sights." I did that last summer. I am here to deliver school supplies to children who would otherwise have no supplies at all - nothing!

Pam Bucur de Arevalo, the person who organizes Adopt-A-School, puts us to work right away - no

naps under mosquito nets or cold Amazon River water showers for us.

We begin by sorting supplies for the 38 adopted schools. Each school receives a bag of general supplies. The piles grow to mounds as we add: tape, chalk, markers, books, paper, maps, encyclopedias, soccer balls. The materials are put into a rice bag, marked and tied with a string. In addition to the general supplies, each child receives a supply sack with his name printed on it. Each sack contains: pencils, a sharpener, blank booklets, a pen, colored pencils, folders. All supplies are bought in Peru due to the expense of sending them through customs. Also, buying the supplies in Peru helps their economy.

■ Sunday, April 18 - After an early breakfast, we spend the whole day continuing to count, sort and package supplies for the 38 adopted schools. It's humid and cloudy. We are thankful for the cloudy day. We focus on the kindergarten supplies toward the end of the day. The kindergarten classrooms receive a set of assorted puzzles and educational toys. Each kindergarten student will get a packet with items such as a pencil, paper, construction paper, glue.

I befriend "Charlie," a capybara. She has taken up residence at the lodge and is the world's largest rodent. She likes to be petted just like my cats do and she makes the most interesting purring noises.

■ Monday, April 19 - We travel by boat to our first three schools.

"By boat" is the only mode of transportation here. We are greeted on the banks of the Napo River by the villagers. I don't speak Spanish, so a smile and "Buenos Dias" have to suffice. The villagers seem excited to see us. Pam helps with translations, when possible. I wish, at this moment, that I had taken Spanish instead of French.

I am immediately impressed at how well organized this program is. When I signed up to volunteer, I thought we would just drop off the supplies and leave. I had no idea how formal the delivering of school supplies would turn out to be. There is a ceremony of each village, and the visit lasts close to two hours. There are speeches by Pam, Luis (from the Department of Education), the mayor, principal or head teacher, and the president of the PTA. The importance of education is emphasized. Parents must sign a form to say that they are committed to sending their child to school and that the packets have been received.

Luis discusses the obligation that parents have to send their children to school. The children, after all, are their future.

Aside from providing basic school supplies, one Adopt-A-School Program's goal is environmental education. The importance of environmental education is stressed, and teachers, parents, and students are encouraged to continue work on community projects, such as a medicinal garden and a fish pond. A relationship has been built with the communities with a focus on conservation issues. Environmentalists from a university in Iquitos have been working with the rain forest people concerning issues such as alternative hunting practices, replanting slashed and burned areas, and planting nitrogen-fixing trees. These efforts are making a difference.

The ceremony concludes with the handing out packets to each student. Finally, pictures are taken for the schools in the United States. The students also prepare a poster of their rain forest home to send to the United States.

■ Tuesday, April 20 - We visit four more schools.

■ Wednesday, April 21 - We visit Tamanco plus three other schools. Tamanco is the largest school we visit and one that Power has adopted. Actually, there are four U.S. schools needed to adopt Tamanco because of its size. Today is a special event for Tamanco. The village people get out their finest clothes and the whole village attends. Yes, they do wear clothes like T-shirts and shorts, not leaves as some of my students think.

Villagers have opportunities to trade homemade items such as mini-blowguns for clothing. This is popular with tourists. A river boat brings clothes from Iquitos with which villagers can trade their



Precious: Power Middle School teacher Carol Czajkowski helps pack supplies, provided through donations from American children. Her students adopted schools in Peru to which the supplies were sent.

crops.

Children and parents meet us on the banks of the Napo River. Students and adults line the path as we walk to their school. Pam begins the ceremony by introducing me and recognizing Power Middle School for raising the money. (Each student at Tamanco also received one of more than 100 pencils donated by Power.) After Pam and Luis speak, I hand out the packets to each student. There are smiles, handshakes and "gracias senorita" from our Peruvian friends. The children walk away studying the packets. Then pictures are taken outside.

Back inside, Pam translates my wishes for a good school year, the head teacher wishes their friends in the United States good health. We leave the school and wave good-bye as we board the boat for the next three schools. I am pleased that Power has become involved with this endeavor.

■ Thursday-Friday, April 22-23 - We visit eight more schools.

■ Saturday, April 24 - We visit Las Palmas, the other school Power has adopted. The packets won't be delivered here until next week. School is not in session on Saturday, but we stop by to say hello to the teacher. The water is very high, so we must take a dugout canoe to get there. Since returning to the U.S., Pam informs me that the rivers are higher than she has seen in years. Many schools are flooded and have to put off the start of school until mid-June. We get snow days; they get flood days.

■ Saturday-Sunday, April 24-25 - We leave

today and I am exhausted, but I am so pleased that I could be a part of the program. After taking three airplanes and spending 10-12 hours in the air, I land at Detroit Metro. I find it difficult to sleep without the sounds of the rain forest. The rain forest can be a rather noisy place, especially at night, and it seems too quiet. I finally fall asleep, ready to return to Power to share the most incredible experience.

The communities' schools had different personalities. Some students sang songs and some didn't. Some schools were big like Tamanco and some were very small like Sukasari. Some fed us (whole fish and roasted bananas, fresh coconut juice and coconut shavings), but most did not. Some were organized and some were chaotic. Some schools were on the river bank and others we had to wade through the knee-deep water to get to. One thing that is common to all schools, however, is that the children of the rain forest will have an opportunity for a better education this school year.

More than 3,000 children received basic supplies. I am really excited about the conservation issues that are being addressed and believe our money was well spent.

Did I mention the look on the children's faces?

Thank-you, staff and students of Power Middle School, for pitching in to help the children of the rain forest.

Carol Czajkowski is a teacher at Power Middle School in the Farmington district.



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Here we are: Above is a photo taken by Carol Czajkowski during her trip to Peru. She was able to meet some of the students that supplies from American kids will help. She spent two weeks living along the Amazon River in Peru.