



What makes a journalist

by Natalya Stanko

Natalya Stanko is a journalism student in the Schreyer Honor's College at Penn State University. She spent six weeks in Peru in the summer of 2009 as an Amazon Field Volunteer with the Center for Amazon Community Ecology.

It was on my last day in Iquitos, Peru that I finally understood what I should have been doing for these last six weeks in the rainforest. When the realization hit me, I was eating yuca and paiche fish with Daniel Valencia, a Peruvian journalist and anthropologist with the Instituto del Bien Comun – a non-profit organization that supports native communities throughout Peru. I asked Daniel about how he conducted interviews with the indigenous people of the Amazon, and how he introduced their culture to an audience that was largely unaware of the natives' existence.

I was curious, because I had been doing much of the same. This summer I interned in the Peruvian Amazon with Dr. Campbell Plowden, president of the Center for Amazon Community Ecology (CACE), a non-profit organization headquartered in State College. I learned about the Center's resin research and shared CACE's discoveries and community projects in my blog. I also interviewed artisans and wrote articles about them for CACE's online handicrafts store.



I had met Daniel in a village along the way, and he asked me to dinner to compare notes. I wanted to make my articles stronger, and I thought Daniel could help me out. That's why my fork and knife had company this evening: a notepad and pencil.

Daniel did not have a notepad. In response to my barrage of questions, he stared at me, expressionless. And he said: “Do you always ask so many questions? Questions may work in the city, but they are useless out in the field. Have you noticed that the indigenous people always say 'yes' to whatever you ask them?”

Yes.

“They're not used to questions, so you shouldn't ask them.”

My innards lurched and my brain slammed into my skull. A realization! He was right, and this is what had been gnawing at me all along. All those boat rides, all those faces, all that scrambled Spanish, and I was doing it all wrong.

When Daniel visits a village, he first and foremost does nothing. “I just watch, follow people around. I fish, hunt and pee with them. I listen to their conversations and their silences, and eventually they want to talk to me.”

I looked away from Daniel and listened to the city. Motorcycles turned at the intersection in front of the plaza. I counted 23 motorcycles, one car.

We sat in silence.

The waitress brought us juice. And Daniel said:
“I blend myself a glass of mango juice every morning. It tastes best fresh.”

I laughed and exhaled. I hadn't done it all wrong! This silence, followed by a sudden break in silence with something as trite as mango juice, was familiar. Daniel could have said so many things to break that silence, but he chose mango juice. And that, as I later learned that night, said a lot about him.



I knew this silence. Elvira Peña Saldano had introduced me to this silence. I had arrived at her doorstep exhausted from folding and flipping my tongue in mangled Spanish for three hours with the other village artisans. Instead of asking the usual questions, I watched her weave a handbag out of chambira, a local palm tree. Her 16-year-old daughter, Lisbet, watched me, and I watched Elvira, and Elvira watched her hands.

We listened to the rain on the thatched roof. By my United States cultural standards, the silence should have been awkward, but it wasn't.

And then Elvira broke the silence, not with juice, but with an anaconda. In her native Bora tongue, she sang about a snake that transformed into a school of fish. According to Bora legend, these fish cling to other anaconda like lice to hair, explained Elvira's husband, Sergio.

In response, I just nodded.

I had asked other Bora what being Bora meant to them. But they never answered, preferring to giggle and talk amongst themselves in Bora. And now, because I didn't ask, Elvira told me.

Elvira grew up here in Brillo Nuevo, a village of about 80 families on a tributary of the Amazon River. It is where she learned to sing in both Bora and Spanish. And where her 11-year-old pet parrot, Maruja, learned both Bora and Spanish.

Now, fifty-five years later, life is changing in Brillo Nuevo. Everyone used to know how to sing and dance. The community would have ten or eleven traditional festivals every year, Elvira says. Now they

hardly have one.

After Lisbet finishes school this year, she wants to move to the city to attend university. Lisbet wants to be a scientist or engineer. She tells me that she is going to learn English, and that she will visit me in the United States.

But for now, Lisbet still spends the afternoon with her mom, learning to weave bags out of chambira.



"Now most of us are more interested in making money than singing and dancing and being together," Elvira says. "And that is why I tell my Lisbet my stories. Why I sing. And why I teach her to work with chambira. In this way, we are still Bora."

Elvira broke the silence with an anaconda, with a Bora legend, with her culture and her daughter's culture -- with what was most important to her.

Similarly, Daniel broke the silence with mango juice. Daniel said that he hopes he can always pick a fresh mango. He wants

his articles and research about the natives of the Amazon to influence the government to form an area of conservation for the indigenous communities. That way, they, too, can enjoy fresh fruit from healthy forests each morning.

In the Amazon, I learned that, when in the Amazon, most questions are stupid questions, and that there's always time to find out the answers without asking the questions. I learned that a journalist doesn't always carry a notepad and pencil.

First, a journalist listens.

And yes, the rainforest has lots of bugs and boats. To find out what chiggers look like and how I survived a 27-hour canoe ride, or to learn more about the CACE's research and community projects, visit my trip blog: <http://amazonecologyns.blogspot.com> and www.amazonecology.org.

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