

A man and a woman are smiling at the camera. The man is on the left, wearing a dark jacket over a white shirt. The woman is on the right, wearing a dark jacket over a light blue shirt. In the foreground, a video camera with a microphone and a pink strap is visible. The background shows a vast, hilly landscape under a cloudy sky.

# INCREDIBLE JOURNEY

Finding warmth and inner peace during a stint as CARE Corps volunteers, one couple turns their back on the corporate world to start a new career.

**BY JESSIE KNADLER**

**IN A DILAPIDATED TRUCK CLINGING TO THE EDGE** of a steep Andean road, Susan and Ray Ellis rode four hours to a mountain village near Ayacucho, Peru. Once there, the Ellises unclenched their hands, climbed down from the truck, and were soon surrounded by children asking questions. Startled by the children's openness, the couple later learned that they were probably some of the first Americans ever to visit the area.

Susan and Ray were in Peru as part of the international humanitarian organization CARE Corps's new

three-week volunteer adventure to the remote Andean town of Ayacucho, approximately 200 miles southeast of Lima, the capital city. CARE Corps offers an "educational travel and hands-on service learning program" for people like the Ellises who want to make a difference in developing countries.

CARE Corps volunteers work with families living in poverty in Ayacucho, the second-poorest part of Peru. Over the past 20 years, the area had been heavily traumatized by violence caused by the Shining Path terror-



ist faction. Despite a newfound peace, making a return to normal life has been difficult for the town's 100,000 residents. The Ellises, however, felt more at ease in this secluded village than they'd felt anywhere else in a very long time.

Susan, 32, was the executive director of video production for a software company. Ray, 39, worked in the film department of the same company. Impressed by each other's creativity and drive, they fell in love, dated, and got married five and a half years ago. The couple seemed to have it all—yet both felt incomplete. "I was missing a human connection," says Susan. "We were just playing the corporate game. Our lives had become really predictable."

Seeking a change, the Ellises discussed traveling the world—maybe to Peru, which had long interested Susan. International volunteerism was also an option, but they figured time constraints and a lack of foreign language skills would pose problems. Then their coworker handed Susan a CARE Corps postcard featuring a Peruvian woman with a child strapped to her

interest in Ray's arm hair. "They'd come sit next to him and feel it," says Susan. "This is a community of single-parent homes. Mothers aren't always available to provide their children with a lot of attention and affection."

Yet the Ellises couldn't get over the children's warmth. "The boys and girls were so nice. They'd sit next to you, hold your hand," recalls Ray. "It's really something that they'd been missing." Afternoons were spent playing games like Twister and chess, for which they used shards of cardboard and checker pieces.

"They didn't have school or art supplies, but what they did have, they took a lot of pride in and took great care of," explains Ray. "Being around them made us realize how much we take for granted, and how closed off, fearful, and impatient we can be. In Peru, they just accept you as you are and take it for granted that you're a good person."

By the time the three weeks ended, saying goodbye was difficult. "My Spanish was still very rough, so we had to express our thoughts through hugging," says Susan. She cried and waved to the children as her bus

and find a way to use that passion to help someone else," Susan explains.

Ayacucho had incited a change in each of them. Why go back to the way things were, they thought, when they could move forward?

Ray and Susan have since started Footpath Pictures Inc., their own film company that produces documentary-style programming aimed at promoting volunteerism around the world. Their first video was filmed in Costa Rica for Cross Cultural Solutions ([www.crossculturalsolutions.org](http://www.crossculturalsolutions.org)), an international volunteer organization and partner of CARE.

Susan and Ray are currently shooting another video—the company's first actual paying assignment—for the Durham, North Carolina, chapter of Habitat for Humanity, a nonprofit housing organization. The couple also just put the finishing touches on the pilot episode of *Reach Out*, a reality-based television show that follows four volunteers in Costa Rica. "If the show gets picked up, you may see us in India or Africa next," says Susan.



back. The image touched a deep chord in Susan. "The woman on the postcard looked optimistic, even joyful," she recalls.

Soon after, the couple was on their way to Ayacucho with CARE Corps on an assignment to work with at-risk children aged four to 17. "We were glad because we thought the kids would be forgiving of the language barriers," laughs Susan.

Right away, Ray and Susan could tell the kids had had very little exposure to men. They took particular

**After a civil war in Ayacucho left many children orphaned or nearly so, CARE Corps volunteers like the Ellises have provided essential child-adult interaction. Widows often take the youngest to work with them, but afternoons spent playing games and hanging out may be the only downtime the older kids have with grown-ups.**

drove away. "There's a chance I'll never see them again," she says. "The trip had a huge impact."

The experience prompted the Ellises to want to keep giving even after they returned home. The couple had lost interest in reentering the corporate world. Instead, they began developing a short video, which CARE is now using to recruit future volunteers. "We saw this as an opportunity to take what we love doing

"The kids in Ayacucho inspired us to take the idea of international volunteerism to the next level," says Ray. "We're making videos for people like us who had no idea programs like CARE Corps existed but who want to help. No, you're not going to change the world in three weeks, but it's another rung in the ladder." ©

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