

## **Serving in Ecuador: Closet or Cocoon?**

**- Brad Mattan, Former Volunteer, 2008-2010, Wendell, Current Volunteer, 2009-2011**

### *Editor's Note:*

*This document was written and contributed to by a group of LGBT Peace Corps Volunteers in Ecuador. It was originally to be a chapter in a longer document put together by Ecuador PCVs to help new volunteers familiarize themselves with their lives as a PCV in this country. This chapter was aimed at newly arriving LGBT PC trainees. We are including it on our website as a resource for applicants and nominees to Ecuador, but also to other Latin American countries where the cultural and social situation may be similar. It could also stand as a model for another country specific document put together by current and/or recent LGBT PCVs. We are including it as a PDF file to facilitate downloading.*

## I. Introduction

*“I don’t regret the decision [to join Peace Corps] whatsoever. I wanted to have an expanded sense of what it is to be human in other parts of the world. I wanted to have a better understanding of poverty and those who are among the most vulnerable. I wanted some time away from academia to define who I was and if I really wanted to be a psychologist. I also wanted an experience that would really challenge me and force me to grow up in a way that [university life] simply doesn’t permit. In a surprising way, Peace Corps really forces you to get to know yourself and take care of yourself. As I once put it, it teaches you to be your own best friend. In a “foreign” culture and country, you’re the only one who knows what your wants, needs, strengths, and weaknesses are. If you don’t, you figure it out fast! I encourage you to consider not just your sexual orientation but also what your values are... ...Consider in what ways you want to be formed.*

*However, that’s not to say that your concerns about being able to be yourself aren’t valid: far from it! I wish I had considered that a little more seriously before heading off to Ecuador. As I said, I don’t regret my decision to become a Peace Corps Volunteer. Yet, I realize now that I was a little naïve with respect to thinking that being in the closet would be a piece of cake... ...In Ecuador, I figured, ‘hey, I’ve been in the closet before. I can go back, no problem.’ What I didn’t realize was that once you’re out, you don’t want to go back. As you can imagine, it’s not healthy to hide such a meaningful part of who you are. That’s especially true if you highly value honesty and authenticity as I do. In short, it’s not a good idea to sugar-coat just how difficult it can be to be a LGBT volunteer.” –Brad Mattan, Former Volunteer*

Let’s face it; being LGBT and working in Ecuador is tough. Many, like Brad and Sonia (see Section V,) arrived naively thinking that returning to the closet would be no problem. Others know exactly what they are getting into and yet realize that knowing that helps little. Others still begin service in Ecuador and later come out to family and the friends for the first time. Some LGBT volunteers early terminate in part because of the stress related to hiding their sexual identity. Wherever you may be in your service-journey, know that you’re not alone. Many have been through and/or continue to deal with similar excitements and frustrations and we want to share them with you.

In this resource, we will discuss a number of aspects related to being a LGBT volunteer in Ecuador. Topics include being in the closet (Section II,) relationships (Section III,) stereotypes (Section IV,) and the LGBT communities of Ecuador (Section V.) In each section, we offer different perspectives on how to manage such difficulties. However, as with all ideas, take these with a grain of salt. The only person who truly knows what is right for you is you. In the last section, we provide a list of additional resources (Section VI) that volunteers in Ecuador may find useful during their two years of service.

As you read through each section of this resource, try to note especially the positive aspects of what is presented. For example, having to be more wary of sharing your sexual identity (see Section II) is certainly stressful. However, what knowledge or understanding could you gain from such an experience? As Brad mentions above, it’s good to occasionally reflect on what you want out of your service, be it personal growth, independence, making your mark, learning about

others, or even learning another language. In addition to contemplating your goals and growth experiences as a volunteer, be sure to note *and use* the resources presented here and elsewhere. Though you're your most important resource, there are a number of people, places, and things that will also help to make your service just a little easier.

Yes, living in Ecuador or anywhere as a LGBT volunteer can be difficult. As Brad cautions above, the difficulties are not to be sugar-coated. In spite of difficulties, you are not without resources and support. Above all, your greatest support will be you. Take care of yourself, and not just your physical wellbeing but also your mental and spiritual wellbeing. Stay in touch with your friends and family. Most importantly, check in with yourself every so often and make sure that your goals are still relevant and in sight. If you know you are doing what you want to be doing and becoming the person you want to be, the difficult stretches of your service will eventually give way to more happy and memorable moments.

## **II. The Closet**

*“When I first arrived as a trainee from Florida, I was still in the closet to most of my friends and family. However, I saw the Peace Corps as an opportunity to start over, to begin a new life as an openly gay individual. Likewise, in-between tech-trips, workshops, and vaccinations, I scouted out the perfect moment to share my deep, dark secret. I eventually found that moment, and by the time I was packing my bags to go to site, the majority of my [training group] knew I was gay. And to my surprise, everyone was very accepting. It turns out my being gay wasn't a big deal to anyone but me. Having a network of friends in Ecuador who know about my sexuality has helped me to be a successful volunteer. I can't imagine being closeted to my Peace Corps friends--it would have been a lonely two years.” -Wendell, Current Volunteer*

### **Life in the Closet**

One of the most stressful issues facing LGBT volunteers in Ecuador concerns “the closet.” Upon arrival, many volunteers question how their life in Ecuador will differ from their life in the States. Closeted volunteers may consider coming out, and openly gay volunteers may wonder if prejudice towards homosexuality merits a return to closeted life.

Either way, the question is a difficult one. Regardless of whether or not (and to whom) you decide to come out, it's important that you're comfortable with your decision and that it's what's best for your wellbeing. If you find yourself wondering about where you belong in relation to the closet, please read the following points concerning “the closet” in Ecuador.

### **Your Fellow Volunteers**

We all know that life in the closet sucks. Perhaps the only thing more stressful than being in the closet, unfortunately, is coming out. Although being an LGBT volunteer in Ecuador presents a number of difficulties, it also presents a unique opportunity. As seen in the above story, many LGBTs find their Peace Corps service the perfect environment in which to reveal their sexuality. Peace Corps volunteers are generally more open to LGBT issues, and the Peace Corps community provides a positive environment in which to experiment with a new

identity. Among other support services, you'll have access to Peace Corp/Ecuador's LGBT Support Group, an organization of volunteers who understand your anxieties and can offer resources and encouragement. Additionally, many LGBT volunteers feel that their experience coming out to fellow volunteers builds the needed confidence to address the subject with family and friends.

### **Your Community**

While coming out to fellow volunteers is often a positive, character-building experience, coming out to one's community is a very different issue. In many parts of Ecuador homosexuality is not-well tolerated, and in extreme cases, coming out may prove deleterious to a volunteer's integration, work, and security. Likewise, one should exercise much prudence when deciding to come out to friends and coworkers in the community.

Despite the negative tone of this passage, coming out to community members may be the best choice for some volunteers, and in other cases, it may even be a very positive experience. The best recommendation is to use your knowledge of the community and common sense to determine how receptive host country nationals will be to an LGBT volunteer. If you feel apprehensive concerning the attitude of the community towards LGBTs, it may be best to keep your sexual identity under wraps. If for any reason you feel threatened, you should contact the Peace Corps Security Officer.

Being a "closeted" bisexual presents a special challenge for some volunteers in their sites. In a way it's an advantage if you want to be in the closet. For example, you can still date the opposite sex and not have to explicitly lie about your *gustos* (preferences.) However, as former volunteer Sarah Goodspeed says, "Although I was able to date and tried to be open with my partners even if they wouldn't get it, there was a part of me unfulfilled not necessarily because I didn't date women but because I haven't been wholly accepted for everything I am."

Sarah's frustrations stem in part from the fact that there is little comprehension among the majority of Ecuadorians of bisexuality and the reality of bisexual individuals. As volunteers come to learn, many in Ecuador consider homosexuality to be an illness and believe strict gender roles to be the God-given order. For these reasons, bisexual individuals many times find themselves stuck between a rock and a hard place when it comes to expressing their full identity.

### **Coming Out to Yourself, Family, and Friends in the US**

Though "The Closet" section may seem somewhat discouraging at best, there is a silver lining. Peace Corps offers you the opportunity to recreate yourself as one can do when changing schools or cities of residence. The intense self-discovery that many LGBT volunteers go through during their service leads many to discover their sexual identity and the strength and pride to show it. Even if you spend your service more closeted than you

might prefer, most volunteers find that it is a small price to pay for developing a stronger sense of self and self-esteem.

That being said, don't forget about your friends and family back home. Without a doubt, personal growth comes as a pleasant surprise to the volunteer. At some point, that change will show through to family and friends back home. The stronger sense of self and self-esteem that LGBT volunteers develop leads many to consider coming out to family and friends back home, something that would have been inconceivable to them during pre-service training. As a matter of fact, several LGBT volunteers have come out to themselves and/or to their family during their service.

Former volunteer Sarah Goodspeed notes that, in addition to her in-service self-discovery process, the "distance cushion" from her family was particularly helpful in her decision to come out to her parents. The physical separation from home helped to reduce the intimidation or uncertainty that she once felt from certain members of her family. Plus, the distance helped to make both Sarah and her family more aware of just how much they love each other, causing all to feel much closer. As was the case for Sarah, the personal growth process and the separation provide for many difficult moments for volunteers. However, those are also experiences that are very favorable to coming out to family and friends back home.

In conclusion, the looming closet may seem as oppressive to some Peace Corps Trainees as the cocoon is to the caterpillar. However, keeping the big picture in sight and your good friends on speed-dial, your service as an LGBT volunteer may prove to be the most transformative experience of your life. It is our hope that you find yourself among the many fabulous butterflies at your Close of Service (COS) conference.

### **III. Relationships**

*"The hardest part, for me, of dating during PC service is the inability to express my affection in public. While I have never really engaged in any public displays of affection, I have found myself being particularly on edge when embracing my boyfriend. Whether it's in my own house or a public place, before making any advances, I have to quickly assess my surroundings to ensure that we have ABSOLUTE privacy. This has come to be particularly stressful given that in the US I was totally 'out' and never had to worry about being discovered.*

*However, in Ecuador we do have some advantages to help confront these stresses. First, in Ecuador men are generally more physical with each other than in the US. It is very common to see two 'straight' men walking together arm-in-arm. Also, given that the vast majority of people do not speak English, I am able to speak openly and publicly about my emotions and know that people generally do not understand me. Lastly, since homosexuality is generally repressed in Ecuador, I have found that people will not assume someone is gay unless they state it or perform an overtly gay action (i.e. kissing in public.) So while there are certain restraints*

*that one must exercise while having a LGBT relationship in Ecuador, it is certainly manageable to enjoy a happy, healthy relationship.” –Jason, Current Volunteer*

Committing to an LGBT relationship in Ecuador, whether it’s with a fellow volunteer or a host country national, can be one of the most treasured experiences of your two-year service. As with any relationship, however, dating an LGBT in Ecuador has its ups and downs. It’s therefore beneficial to have an idea of the problems you’re liable to face and strategies to deal with relationship issues.

### **Dating Another Volunteer**

One of the best parts about dating another PCV is the support they can offer; not only do relationships between volunteers provide a healthy environment for sharing anxieties about volunteer life, but boyfriends and girlfriends who are volunteers understand the pressures of being a LGBT in Ecuador. Likewise, they don’t have to worry about the cultural differences that often strain intercultural relationships.

However, a negative aspect of relationships between volunteers is that volunteer sites are usually far apart. Traveling in-between sites may prove difficult, or perhaps even unfeasible due to travel restrictions and limited out-of-site days. And of course, one should ensure that being in a relationship doesn’t undermine integration efforts or weaken ties with the community. In addition to the distance-related problems, there may be problems related to the level of comfort each volunteer has with respect to being out. William Tanner, a former volunteer, shares that, “an LGBT couple may be at odds if one person is uncomfortable with expressing his or her sexual orientation with the volunteer community while the other wants the world to know. These differences can cause stress for both people in the relationship. It’s important to find balance so that both partners are comfortable with the level of ‘publicity’ in their relationship.”

Despite these and other challenges, however, many LGBT volunteers have successfully maintained relationships. The potential difficulties listed above should certainly not scare you away from beginning one.

### **Dating an Ecuadorian**

Similar to relationships between volunteers, an intercultural relationship can be a very rewarding experience. Dating a host country national can provide you with insight into Ecuadorian life and culture that you would otherwise not have, and talking with Ecuadorian boyfriends and girlfriends provides another forum to practice Spanish (or Kichwa). More so than American relationships, however, intercultural relationships can pose significant challenges.

Although every relationship is different, one of the common areas of difficulty has to do with emotional attachment and expression. Social convention in much of Ecuador dictates a high level of emotional attachment and romanticism in relationships from the beginning relative to relationships in the US. Using gross stereotypes to illustrate this point, an American may view his new Ecuadorian boyfriend as excessively emotional and moving “way too fast” while the Ecuadorian boyfriend may see his American counterpart as complicated, reticent and uncommitted. Though one or both members of this hypothetical relationship could be right on in their impressions, culture could also be playing a role in their relationship dynamic.

Unfortunately, we lack the space and expertise to move far beyond such generalized examples, the moral of the story is that it's important for both individuals to be aware of the challenges that could arise from the differences between American and Ecuadorian romance.

One strategy used by a PCV in Ecuador was to focus on being very direct about his needs and expectations of a potential partner during the period before the relationship became "official." This period is crucial because emotions are generally easier to monitor and control. Plus, commitment is not on the table as a "given;" so even if your potential partner may feel strongly about a relationship, there is less pressure for you to feel that you have to reciprocate equally, especially if you're not comfortable with it. As in any relationship, it's important to promptly stand up for your expressed needs and expectations the moment they are misunderstood or not respected. Not doing so could result in your potential partner thinking that your expressed need or expectation is really not that important to you. This strategy works best if it is explicitly agreed upon by both partners, so it's important to mention early on. If you are able to establish a dialogue early on about the importance of the personal needs of both individuals, then you will be better prepared when inevitable *choques* (culture shocks) do come up. As with any relationship, success rests in large part on a mutual negotiation of differences in expectations. Coming to appreciate those differences will make life as a couple much easier, and much more enjoyable.

For more information on intercultural relationships, the Peace Corps/Ecuador library in Quito has a great book by Dugan Romano called [Intercultural Marriage](#). Though the book talks about marriages, really it's a good book for intercultural couples at any stage. You can also find it for free online at

[http://books.google.com/books?id=ZyPi\\_nE1ZfgC&printsec=frontcover&dq=intercultural+marriage&source=bl&ots=MMIF3Pm2GS&sig=jLss\\_k1Aru2hHVFCAdRfhwLcrwk&hl=en&ei=sCL\\_TMctM4qhnwebgJXnCQ&sa=X&oi=book\\_result&ct=result&resnum=1&sqi=2&ved=0CB0Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false](http://books.google.com/books?id=ZyPi_nE1ZfgC&printsec=frontcover&dq=intercultural+marriage&source=bl&ots=MMIF3Pm2GS&sig=jLss_k1Aru2hHVFCAdRfhwLcrwk&hl=en&ei=sCL_TMctM4qhnwebgJXnCQ&sa=X&oi=book_result&ct=result&resnum=1&sqi=2&ved=0CB0Q6AEwAA#v=onepage&q&f=false)

One final concern on the topic of dating an Ecuadorian is that LGBT volunteers must carefully consider the level of commitment to which they aspire with their Ecuadorian partner. This is a major point that is important to discuss early on, if possible. While some heterosexual volunteers do choose to marry a host country national in Ecuador, for LGBT volunteers, this is not a possibility. This, of course, makes it difficult to continue the relationship beyond the time a volunteer resides in Ecuador unless his or her partner has the means to independently secure a visa to the US or some other country where the couple may wish to live. However, even if an intercultural couple manages to legally marry in a US or foreign state that guarantees marriage equality, the discriminatory Defense of Marriage Act (DOMA) of 1996 prohibits the Federal Government from recognizing legal same-sex marriages in any way, including granting citizen status to the foreign same-sex spouse. All the same, current and former volunteers can and have maintained relationships with Ecuadorian partners of the same sex far beyond their two years of service.

## **Being Single**

Of course, one option always available to LGBT volunteers is to remain single. Staying single allows you to avoid the typical relationship troubles that beset many volunteers. Nevertheless, you may still receive unwanted sexual attention from members of your community. If you're in the closet, it's likely that you'll be approached and flirted with by members of the opposite sex. Just like some LGBT Ecuadorians, some heterosexual Ecuadorians are excited by the prospect of an intercultural relationship and will look to date the local *gringo* or *gringa*. If you wish to avoid such attention, you can always tell the community that you have a girlfriend or boyfriend in Ecuador or in the States. Most of the time, this will suffice to deter unwanted suitors, but there are the occasional die-hards who won't relent so easily. In such cases, you may have to be rude or even solicit aid from the much sharper tongue of a host family member or friend in the community.

For those volunteers who *are* out to their community, you may or may not see reduced sexual attention from members of the opposite sex. Sometimes, and especially for female volunteers, identifying yourself as a lesbian won't make any difference to some would-be suitors. It's important to remember that though you see your sexual orientation as an identity, many Ecuadorians (or Americans for that matter) will see it as a behavior that can easily be changed. To illustrate this point, one gay volunteer came out to a female friend who worked as a clinical psychologist in a major Ecuadorian city. The female friend later gave several signs that she was interested in dating this volunteer, suggesting that maybe he just hadn't met the right woman yet.

#### **IV. Stereotypes**

*"In any class, yet especially for those of us who teach Sex Ed, it is vital to promote awareness, positive self-image, healthy attitudes, and to reduce stereotyping sexual identity. The two rules I have in my classroom are: to have respect towards one other and the subject matter, and to ask questions. This way we build a more democratic space, where the students are free to express themselves, and all are equal. Open discussion of gay, lesbian, bisexual, and transsexual issues helps reduce the isolation of lesbians and gays, demystify their situation, and change the attitudes of others toward them. The main activity built-in my curriculum is conversational activities (word association, politically correct terminology, discussion of students' points of view, discussion of TV shows and movies). Stereotyping becomes a bad habit at a young age particularly in a culture where conventional gender roles only presume heterosexuality and heterosexual relationships.*

*Some of the most common derogatory words used by "jóvenes" in Ecuador are: marica, maricón, meco, badea, marimacho. These terms are judgmental and used when someone's behavior is not in accordance to the conventional gender roles. In my classroom these words are prohibited, and whenever I catch someone using these words outside the school, student or not, I make it a point to take a minute and explain that these words are hurtful, and in the end makes them look bad for it show lack of tolerance towards others who might be different. The responses I've received after talking to these "jóvenes" has been only positive, no one's ever taken the time to explain why it's wrong to use inappropriate words, and that it promotes stereotype, hate and disrespectful behavior. So, whenever you find yourself in a stressful situation where stereotyping language is used towards you or another, just breathe, think and feel free to enlighten that person with compassion." -Caro Quinteros, Former Volunteer*

## **Facing LGBT Stereotypes**

Most volunteers quickly realize that Ecuador isn't the most LGBT-friendly country. Demeaning words like *maricón*, *marica*, *tortillera*, and *travesti* are used on a daily basis by many Ecuadorians, and violence against LGBTs isn't unheard of. So, what can you do when faced with these and other negative stereotypes? As you saw in the case of Caro, one option is to address stereotypes through your work. If you volunteer in an *escuela* or *colegio*, you can incorporate sex education and teach respect for all people, regardless of their sexual orientation. As former volunteer Grant Picarillo (Peace Corps/Guatemala) used to say during his Sex-Ed classes, "we all deserve respect: *mestizo*, indigenous, gay, lesbian, bisexual, black, white, etc... and purple!"

However, what could you do when faced with negative stereotypes in the street or in a non-school workplace? Should you do anything? Though in every situation you need to use your best judgment, we will provide here a possibility. If you hear an acquaintance using anti-LGBT language, you can tell the individual such words make you uncomfortable. As Caro noted in the introduction above, people will recite stereotypes and demeaning-terms because they have yet to meet anyone who disagreed with their use. By stating your opposition to such language with compassion, you may be surprised by just how positive of a response you get.

Other volunteers find opportunities to challenge mistaken notions and stereotypes in casual conversation about gossip or current events. As the global gay rights movement steadily gains ground, the subject of homosexuality increasing comes up in conversation. When one gay volunteer's host mother mentioned an article about gay adoption in Uruguay, he unthinkingly responded "*chévere*." Upon observing the confused look on his host mother's face, he proceeded to explain why he (as a "heterosexual ally") was in favor of gay rights. The volunteer's host mother was particularly moved by the fact that the volunteer had a bisexual cousin about whom he cares greatly.

## **V. LGBT Communities of Ecuador: A Brief Overview**

*"In the months before our staging event in Miami, while reading about LGBT issues in Ecuador, I came to the conclusion that if it was dangerous and unsafe for me to be 'out' and pursue an LGBT life, then I wasn't going to have one there. I figured that if I have been in the closet before I could do it one more time in Ecuador; I figured that if I have been single before then I could be single again; I figured two years with no LGBT 'contact' whatsoever couldn't be that bad. Very positive of me, huh? Well, it turns out I was wrong... No, it turns out I was extremely wrong. Yes, there is still discrimination and stereotypes in the Ecuadorian society; yes, people still wonder and ask about a thousand times why am I still single and have no children ('¡Dios Santo... que pena!'); and yes, it is somewhat unsafe to be 'out' in the community. Nonetheless, I found that (and now you too will see) that Ecuador has a big and influential LGBT movement that is pushing very hard for a more tolerant society and a more inclusive government. Quito and Guayaquil offer a great extent of LGBT resources that you can use for your own well-being (psychological, physical, moral and -... yes- sexual) and that will make your Peace Corps service (and mine) more enjoyable. I don't only have 'contact' with LGBT issues; I actually work for an organization fighting for LGBT rights, I have a serious relationship with an incredible*

*(and very hot) Ecuadorian, and I have a group of lesbian friends that are always happy to support me and make feel like at home.” –Sonia, Current Volunteer*

In comparison to many countries where Peace Corps has posts, Ecuador has fairly developed LGBT communities. By far, the largest and most organized of these communities are concentrated in Quito and Guayaquil. In the rest of Ecuador, small, though sometimes underground, LGBT communities can be found in the provincial capitals. Unfortunately, there seems to be lacking a sense of national and oftentimes local unity among the LGBT populations of Ecuador. For this reason, we refer to the LGBT populations of Ecuador not as one homogeneous community, but rather as several communities.

### **Toto, I Don't Think we're in Kansas Anymore...**

In spite of the presence of LGBT communities throughout Ecuador, be careful not to think that your local gay community will be like the one you left in the US. In fact, if you come from, or have spent time in, a thriving LGBT community in the US or other parts of the world, the LGBT communities of Ecuador are likely to surprise you in a number of ways, both pleasant and unpleasant. All the same, we hope that the Ecuadorian friends of Dorothy will soon be yours too.

### **You're a Rock Star**

Among the surprises that many volunteers discover when they dive into a LGBT community of Ecuador, is that they are suddenly the center of attention. Especially if a volunteer is fair-skinned and has an eye-color other than brown, Ecuadorian LGBTs take notice. Now, this attention may be quite desirable for some volunteers. Who hasn't dreamed about being a rock star (or a diva) just once? However, for those who are either in a relationship or are single and do not want one, it proves to be an incredible frustration. As is the case for heterosexual volunteers with Ecuadorians of the opposite sex, it can be very difficult for a LGBT volunteer to be "just friends" with LGBT members of the same sex. If you find yourself feeling lonely and wishing for LGBT friends, you will likely have to deal with some of your new "friends" wanting more. *Así es la vida de un rock star.*

### **Friendships**

One way you can go about developing friendships with LGBT Ecuadorians in, or close, to your community is to find the local hangout. Oftentimes, there's a bar, hair salon, or restaurant in town where the LGBTs go to hang out and chat. If you can strike up a conversation with one of them, you can learn a lot about that particular LGBT community and the people who are part of it. Alternatively, by word of mouth, you can generally find your local socialite; you know, the friendly guy or girl who knows everyone. If you get to know one person, you can get to know many more. Or, if you can't find your local social butterfly, another good LGBT person to get to know is one that already is in a relationship. Though this doesn't always exclude the possibility of some drama, it is generally a safer bet than looking for random single friends at the *discoteca*. If you live in, or near a major city you may consider volunteering at a local foundation that works in HIV-AIDS or LGBT concerns. Unlike at a club or bar, the environment at such organizations is much more conducive to getting to know a person and groups of people. It will also be a place where you can feel freer to be yourself.

If you are able to develop a friendship with even one LGBT Ecuadorian, it will help tremendously. Among other things, your LGBT Ecuadorian friend will provide a listening ear and (generally) sound advice if you have concerns regarding concealing your sexual identity or your Ecu-novio.

### **The Closet**

Even in the large cities like Quito and Guayaquil, you are bound to find a much larger proportion of closeted individuals than in the big LGBT communities of the US. The level of ignorance, stigmas, and discrimination regarding LGBT individuals in Ecuador is relatively higher and so more threatening for LGBT Ecuadorans. Though there are many Ecuadorian families who love their openly-gay children, many others prefer to send them to conversion therapy or even to the street. Such isolation can be devastating for LGBT Ecuadorians as family is very central to one's identity.

In addition to exclusion from the family, an LGBT Ecuadorian faces workplace discrimination, housing discrimination, and physical harm should his or her sexual identity be revealed. Though the constitution of 2008 protects many gay rights, most people seem to distrust that the government/police will actually enforce them. One gay couple in Cuenca was kicked out of their apartment for being gay. They did not contest the decision of their landlord.

For these reasons, it is not uncommon to hear of LGBT Ecuadorians who marry the opposite sex and who even have kids. Though this is especially true in smaller provincial towns, it is known to have happened even in Ecuador's largest cities.

Also due to the perceived necessity of hiding one's "alternative" sexual identity, many LGBT Ecuadorians from smaller cities tend to despair of maintaining a relationship with a partner of the same sex. This sense of despair tends to affect the culture of provincial gay communities, shifting the focus of its members more towards discreet and/or casual encounters and less towards developing trusting friendships, relationships and a sense of community identity. Some volunteers find this dynamic frustrating as it tends to drive a potential gay community underground. This tends to make it more difficult (though not impossible) to have a healthy friendship/relationship with an LGBT Ecuadorian of that community.

### **Sex Ed 101**

Thanks in part to the efforts of many Peace Corps Volunteers, Ecuadorian sexual education and HIV-AIDS outreach have made remarkable strides in recent years. Unfortunately, many adults of all ages remain unaware of the ways in which Sexually Transmitted Infections (STI), including HIV-AIDS, are transmitted from one individual to another. Even if your partner seems quite educated, don't take for granted that he or she knows everything about STIs. Case in point, one volunteer's partner did not know that HIV could be transmitted by semen and vaginal fluids. PLEASE be sure that you use condoms and/or other protection if you are sexually active. Talk about STIs with your Ecuadorian partner even if it is awkward. If you enter into a long term relationship, you may consider getting tested together, just to be sure.

## **VI. Additional Resources for PCVs in Ecuador**

*“So where is the salon in Cayambe with a trans stylist?” –Brad Mattan, Former Volunteer*

During your time in Ecuador, you’ll be quite happy to discover that there are a number of gay-friendly resources, organizations, and locales throughout the country. Some are even closer than you might think. Read on!

### **Peace Corps/Ecuador LGBT Peer Support Group: SpeQtrum**

In addition to the stresses that most volunteers face in Ecuador, LGBT volunteers face the additional stress of coming to terms with their sexual identity in a number of new environments, including the Peace Corps office, training site, work sites, the coast, the *sierra*, the *oriente*, and even family back home. All of these environments are, to varying degrees, stressful to an LGBT volunteer who is forced to re-learn the place of his or her sexual identity in each one. In response to this and other stresses inherent to the situation of LGBT volunteers serving in Ecuador, the LGBT Peer Support Group (now called SpeQtrum) was reinstated in November, 2009. The first priority of this group was the creation of a strong support network for LGBT volunteers during their 2+ years of service.

In an effort to meet its goal of supporting LGBT volunteers, SpeQtrum developed the following goals for the fiscal year 2009-2010:

1. A “safe space” sensitivity training for Peace Corps/Ecuador staff.
2. Co-facilitation of the Diversity Session during Pre-Service Training
3. Facilitation of regional (cluster) sensitivity trainings with the end result of at least one “allied” contact person in each cluster.
4. Non-political pride gathering in June.
5. Three to four support/work meetings during the fiscal year.
6. Regular online social networking and blogging.

If you identify as LGBT or Q and are interested in joining the group, you may email the group at [LGBTecuador@gmail.com](mailto:LGBTecuador@gmail.com).

### **SpeQtrum: Online Contacts/Resources**

Another help for LGBT volunteers in Ecuador is the online resources provided by SpeQtrum. Since November 2009, SpeQtrum has been maintaining a website. (See below for the corresponding URL.) On the website, you’ll find a listing by city of LGBT-friendly resources and locales including, but not limited to, movies, literature, DVD stores, bookstores, libraries, foundations, *discotecas*, cafes, and, of course, hair salons. In addition to the resources presented on the website, you will also be able to read about the experiences of LGBT PCVs and other LGBT-relevant news/reflections.

Website: <http://sites.google.com/site/LGBTecuador/>

### **SpeQtrum: Cluster Contacts and “Safe Space”**

As mentioned in the initial section on SpeQtrum, one of the group’s goals for the 2009-2010 fiscal year was to establish a network of trained cluster contacts. Because many volunteers feel isolated in their sites, it helps to have at least one person in your cluster with whom you can talk

in those difficult moments, particularly if you happen to have no *saldo* (i.e. minutes on your cell phone) to chat with your best buddy on the other side of the country. Please refer to the LGBT Peer Support Group's website for further information about your nearest Cluster Contact.

To improve the level of trust LGBT volunteers feel with Peace Corps/Ecuador staff, the SpeQtrum conducted "Safe Space" workshops in January of 2010. In the "Safe Space" workshops, members of the support group will present on common concerns of LGBT volunteers in Ecuador such as homophobia, trust vs. mistrust, and being in the closet. All members who participated in the workshop will receive a bright "Safe Space" sticker that is to be prominently displayed in their office as an indication that they can be counted on as supportive allies. Should you ever be in Quito and need to talk with a supportive ally, just look for the "Safe Space" sticker!

### **Peace Corps Library: LGBT Literature Section**

In addition to the online and personal resources provided by SpeQtrum, the Peace Corps Library in the Volunteer Lounge in Quito has a fine selection of LGBT themed literature. Next time you make it to Quito, be sure to check out a book for a rainy day. For those who are finishing your service, you may consider leaving any new books to the LGBT section of the Peace Corps Library.

### **LGBT RPCV Listserv and Website**

If you really enjoy social networking and regular updates on the progress of gay rights around the world (particularly in countries with PC contingents now or in the past), consider joining the LGBT RPCV Listserv. It has a mixed group of posters: applicants, nominees, current PCVs and RPCVs, and loyal friends. To subscribe go to [lgbrcpv-subscribe@yahoogroups.com](mailto:lgbrcpv-subscribe@yahoogroups.com).

The same group that operates the LGBT RPCV Listserv also maintains a newsletter-website (<http://www.lgbrcpv.org>.) On the website, you can find articles from the field of LGBT PCVs and RPCVs categorized by country of service and topic. Articles vary in theme. Some are technical, others are political, and still others are human interest/support focused.

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