Sunday — A huge group of the local community greeted us in Santa Elena! My favorite part was the girl who sang to us. It was also really cool to see how appreciative the community is to have an expedition share this week with them.

— Nathan Coonen

I was not sure what to expect when signing up for the expedition and I have been totally blown away. When our bus arrived to the village the reception was so festive and warm. Helping the villagers and seeing their appreciation has been the most satisfying.

— M’Liss Hunter

Tuesday, 7/10/18 — Third day in the village — what amazing people! Warm and welcoming. Such beautiful people to be amongst. Sad that there is such abject poverty here, but they have shown us that you don’t have to have money to be happy. So far, I have helped build and plant gardens from bare plots of ground. Also helped mix cement to pour footings and a floor for a preschool we also watched the local women’s soccer team play.

— Alayne Johnson
Nothing can prepare you for the experiences in a community like Santa Elena! I read my book purchased at Barnes & Noble and there was no chapter to cover life here. The people here are warm and welcoming to us and we want so much to share our comforts with them, but realize ultimately they are at their own comfort already.

I was fortunate enough to experience the gathering of water to just supply our group enough to flush the toilets for two days. This is not like home where you turn on a faucet and run water endlessly. We hauled garbage cans in a pickup about 1.5 miles to fill them with buckets from a canal. Then hauled the bins back to our “home” to unload by buckets to the water tank. This trip was done 6 times! Then we found out this would last 2 days! The process required for the things we take for granted (like flushing the toilet) are lengthy. Our lives, while we feel may be “simple”, do no compare to the complexities of a very simple life experienced here in Santa Elena.

- Sheila Thorpe
This experience has been full of so many emotions. The living conditions have been tough, however, the payoff has been worth every minute of it. The people of Santa Elena are so welcoming, and beyond anything I could have imagined. They live with poverty, but they smile and always engage with us. I am beyond thankful for every day that I am here and have learned what it means to be a part of a community. Thank you for bringing me, and this experience has changed my life.

- Connie Denmark

July 11, 2018 – Last night we watched and judged a community beauty pageant. The criteria were: performance, style, and elegance. I think despite some debate about the best candidate, we chose the candidate that will best represent the community at the regional competition. The amount of work and preparation put into this competition was immense and we wished we could choose them all. Amber kept saying she was making sure to clap for all of them.

- Nathan Coonen

July 10, 2018 – #6 should have won!

- Joshua Mordue, Matthew Pederson Jake Mordue
I've been asking myself today, "What is poverty?" Of course it's the obvious lack of what the rest of us take for granted. Creature comforts, infrastructure, running toilets, clean water, etc. This week as I observed an entire community embrace the arrival of complete strangers who came to help, I see a community that is enriched in other ways. I'm not ignoring their problems, but if they came to my town, I wonder if they would find us as welcoming. Unfortunately, I think not. We are forgetting what it is to be a community. We're perhaps too involved in our own concerns that I'm afraid we've chosen to isolate ourselves and not be open to the wealth of community. That's what these people have. They rely on and help each other. They are open, loving, and industrious. They need almost everything material (except cell phones), but have much love to give.

- Anola Johnson

July 10, 2018 — Today I watched my son and his cousins surrounded by little boys. The boys were surrounding them and playing with them and hanging off of them. I was struck by the feeling that we are so much more alike than we realize. Our material wealth may be miles apart, but we are all children of God. We all like to play and laugh and have fun. We all love deeply and love our families. I am humbled by the circumstances I find myself in, but I am also lifted in spirit by seeing all the ways we are the same. We need to find more ways to serve and love our brothers and sisters. We need to bridge the gaps between us and see that when we do, our love expands. I am humbled by the gratitude and humility I see in the Peruvian people. I am so grateful to have gotten to know some of them. I feel so much love for them already. Thank you to Choice for giving me the opportunity to have this experience.

- Amberly Meeker

I feel such gratitude this morning to Choice Humanitarian for organizing this expedition. They did all the advance work—diagnosis, travel, food, contacts, and agreements to facilitate us and the people who are in need. All we had to do was show up and serve. I feel great gratitude for the people of Santa Elena who had the humility to accept our help and welcomed us so very warmly. I had hoped in my time here to learn more about this people and their beautiful culture—which I did. I had hoped to better understand the issues of extreme poverty, and I do. I set out wanting to give meaningful service, and I have. What I didn't expect was the deep, emotional connection I felt putting a stove in their home and working side by side with the family and experiencing their heartfelt thanks—eye to eye. My life has been enriched by this experience and I have been once again reminded that love, human connection, and service leads us to the best that this mortal life offers.

- Ron McMillan
There were many things in which I recognized the sacrifice of the villagers:
- Greetings and parade coming in – balloons, nice clean flags, streamers, banners, painted rocks, hugs, kisses for unknown people (hospitality)
- CHOICE people had everything set up for stay
- Town square/soccer field dancing & welcome
- Parade of floats -recognition of us—all the work in the parade
- Hospitality as we went into their homes & villages – gifts
- Time in showing us around—showing us their culture—they made their cultural food—breads, cookies with honey, com fish tradition, showing us their traditions, childbirth with local midwife.
- They had dances for us and performances in which they asked us to judge. They also had a beauty contest some of us judged.
- They were so grateful and loving and gave us gifts of cut pieces of wood beautifully engraved.
- upon and keychain cut wood that was carved.
- They always greeted us with a hug and kiss on neck.
- I always felt invited and included in everything. We were the stars.

I feel I was more blessed to be here with them than anything we did to help them. I was blessed to meet and know that there are people in the world who are so happy, loving, kind, and thoughtful. I hope that I can take what I learned and share it with those I know and love and put into action the love and care I learned from those who live here in Peru and particularly this village. I love the people on the expedition with me. They each contribute in their own way to make it special and important to me. The Choice team was great and very attentive to our needs.

- (no name indicated)
“Where’s the wifi?” Also, mas candy por favor!
- Cayden Meeker

I am amazed at how welcoming everybody is here. From the littlest kids to the oldest, they all have been so sweet and happy to see us. After spending a few days here, I realize how much we take for granted. We wake up in the morning and use the bathroom, flushing the toilet, then brush our teeth and not think once about where the water is coming from or where it is going. Here it is a 3 hour process just to get water for us to flush the toilet. Not just water, but everything here is simple and very manual. Back home we rely so much on power tools and machines to do the work for us and here they have a hack saw and shovels. It has been a very eye opening experience and I am grateful the CHOICE for the opportunity.
- Michelle Vaugh

Peru is coooooool.
- Court Linebaugh

“Good afternoon Santa Elena and CHOICE Humanitarian!”
Peru has changed the lives of me and my three children attending forever. We’ve loved the group we were able to spend 24 hours a day with and hope to stay in touch with them. Coming here taught us so many lessons, including that importance of keeping life in the simplicity it was meant to be, as well as being grateful for all we have and the life we live, no matter what it may be.

The common element that brings us together as humans was exemplified with love for each other and for our children.

I loved to see my teenagers connect with the little ones. That pure love was joy, and brought me happiness to watch. Thank you for this amazing experience!
- The Pedersons: “Roberto”, Kelani, Malian, Matthew “El Guapo”
This trip has been both easier and harder than I thought it’d be. I expected the physical labor to be hard, when in truth, it wasn’t. The mental labor on the other hand was. Pool sleep, virtual isolation, no bed or shower, etc. It hasn’t been too hard, and my family has helped me cope. I’m sure that everyone feels the same.

Some things I’ve enjoyed: the kids, though they can tire me out. The food, which is amazing. The ability to connect so well with each other. Amen.

Thanks for the great trip! I’m glad I made the Choice to go. Get it? CHOICE? I’m very funny. Peace out.

- Brock Linebaugh

July 12, 2018 - This experience has been a very delightful and learning experience. Many, many years ago I learned a lot of wonderful things from the Peruvian people. Things that affected my life afterwards. This experience I feel will affect my life in a very similar way I will remember what has happened here forever.

Glenda and I are very grateful for the experience of being here with family. To see our grandchildren act and react to the experiences of a different culture and what they have shared with them is one of those things that only grandparents can understand.

The friends we have made and the experiences we have had will always be with us. We thank CHOICE for the opportunity and thank you for the wonderful work you are doing in the world. I was able to participate in building stoves, planting gardens, and constructing a preschool. Thank you, thank you, for the opportunity.

- Darwin Farr

From the time I stepped onto the plane I realized that this dream of my husband and I was really going to happen. We were flying to Peru! I was not sure what the next few days would bring but I was incredibly grateful to be with my family and excited to have this experience with them. We flew into Lima and then on to Cuzco. Mark from Choice was right there for us and took care of all our needs and travel. What a great guy and perfect person to guide us through this experience.

On our way to our village we were given a taste of how wonderfully special the Peruvian people are. They pulled the bus into La Arena, the municipal town where we marched in a parade, and I met the mayor and his wife, Marisol. Marisol took me in her arms, and with tears in her eyes told me how much we were needed and that the people were in poverty in the village we were going to. She was so grateful and touched. I did not understand most of what she said, but I felt her every word as we cried together.

I love the people of Peru with their humble, sweet, giving ways. This has truly been an amazingly humble and warm experience that has changed my life. I am grateful to all.

- Glenda Farr
We came with a desire to serve, a willingness to work, and a curiosity about the people we would meet. What we found was a happy, hard-working, loving, and grateful people who embodied all the best they had to offer. I was constantly amazed at how creative they are at solving the daily challenges of their lives. They are some of the hardest workers I have ever met! With a little extra knowhow and resources we were able to help them learn to garden, build stoves, and build a preschool that they have been hoping to do for 20 years. TWENTY YEARS! We put it up in four days and they were sooooo grateful. They called it the ‘Smiles and Colors’ Preschool. What a great name! I will forever remember our new friends in Peru.

--- Matt Cameron

7/13/18 – Wow, what an experience this expedition has been! It is so difficult to put into words. I was not sure if I even wanted to go, but so, so glad I did. The first day greeting from the village brought me to tears. Balloons, horns, hands waving, a parade with pink flags lined the village for us. I was simply stunned of the love that was shown to us from the start.

The projects of working on stoves and gardens with others has been interesting and educating. When I heard they had waited 20 years for the preschool building, it was a joy to see the simple building be finally built. The gratitude of the Peruvian people was so heartwarming. The love that was shown I will never forget. They have taught me much of gratitude for the things I have. The happiness that they show despite difficult living circumstances. What a wonderful opportunity this has been and want to thank all of Choice members and also CBT for this unique life experience. I have learned a higher lesson of love! Love for the Peruvian people and the love of our group members. We lived together in a unique and not easy situation, but humor was ever present! What a fun group! Thank you to all!

--- Gina Cameron

And we were extremely fortunate to have an absolutely incredible group of 36 of us in total. And there was not an unpleasant or difficult person in the entire group! What a joy everyone was. We had amazing families, incredible singles, and outgoing and engaged teenagers. A spirit of teamwork, brotherhood, and shared love was ever present. I always enjoy seeing the look of amazement, discovery, love, and joy on the faces of the expeditioners as they experience for themselves this amazing and life-changing experience. Having this kind of immersive, intimate, and profoundly personal experience is so different than tourism. This is real life in much of the developing world. It is indeed a privilege to work with CHOICE and be a small part of this monumental effort to eradicate extreme poverty in the developing world. While there is only so much we can do, we do what we can. Every person on this expedition made an important contribution to lifting the hearts of the less advantaged, providing hope to this small and remote community, and reminding these sweet people that they are not forgotten.

Lucky, lucky, lucky us. Thank you CHOICE Humanitarian. Thank you CHOICE team Peru, and thank you to each of you who have joined the CHOICE family. It was an honor and privilege to serve with you in Santa Elena, Peru.

Much love,
Mark Cameron (Expedition Leader)
About CHOICE

We work with rural communities around the globe ending extreme poverty. We focus on developing local leaders as the basis for sustainable transformation out of poverty.

Why CHOICE

We begin with the exit in mind. Our goal is to train community leaders to take ownership of their own development. We work with communities until they are self-sufficient and sustainable, then we exit and they thrive.

What is Extreme Poverty?

Extreme poverty is defined by the World Bank as living on an average of US $1.90 a day or less. They estimate that 1.44 billion people live in this condition. But extreme poverty is multidimensional and measured beyond income. Areas beyond income include health, education, standard of living, and a general lack of opportunities.

What Makes CHOICE Different?

- **Simple, Appropriate Technologies**
  All technologies introduced can be built and sustained through locally available resources and skills.

- **Strong Local Leaders**
  We train village leaders to manage their programs by relying on their own resources and leadership.

- **Leverage - Turning $1 into $5**
  Villages contribute labor and resources. Local government and partners contribute funds, materials, and training.