

# Venturing Beyond the Hillside

by Blake Taylor '09 and Patrick Fleming '08

Since 2004 South Kent has offered students a four-week opportunity for service work and cross-cultural immersion during the summer. Fourth and fifth form students compete for the annual \$3,400 scholarships to participate in the acclaimed VISIONS summer community service programs at locations in North, Central, and South America, the Caribbean, West Indies, and in Vietnam. Last summer, Sixth Former Blake Taylor traveled to Peru, and Fifth Former and the School's 2007 Millennium Scholar, Patrick Fleming, worked in Alaska.

**O**RANGE GLOW. Smoky scents waft from embers and twigs as I stand, peering into the heart of the world, a campfire dancing with the night. I look above, toward the stars and forward into vast opportunities. The Earth is so big and I am so small.

To this day I imagine the final campfire in the Sacred Valley of Peru; my group of twenty-six kids sipped tea, toasted marshmallows and talked into the late hours. All the memories of our service trip were coalescing with the smoke and flame. July 2008: the most fulfilling month of my life.

But let's start where this story really begins.

I grew up in the growing town of New Milford, Connecticut. I was involved with Boy Scouts and loved the drums. When I was introduced to South Kent School and went from a public school to a private school, my life was changed.

After turbulent middle school years, I gained peace of mind. From my first day on the Hillside, I gathered myself together, prioritizing my studies at the top of my list, my Boy Scout troop second, and my music third. My life became quite simple: wake up, attend school, go to scout activities, and jam with my band. I found myself excelling in classes and, to my surprise, as a cross country runner, encouraged by teachers and coaches. A win-win situation, right?

However, I found myself wanting more. I began wondering, "Is it possible to combine my passion for service, creativity, and academics?" No sooner had this thought arisen than my history teacher plopped a VISIONS bro-



Blake Taylor, Sixth Former

chure in front of me.

As my fifth form year paced forward, I practiced Spanish with my Spanish teacher during my free time. She was from Peru and told me of the earthquake that devastated many communities. She taught me more than just the language, for which I am forever thankful, for I developed a growing admiration for the Peruvian culture and wanted to be a part of it.

After some time, I opened the VISIONS brochure and glanced at photos of far-away places: Vietnam, Dominican Republic, Ecuador, Alaska and more. Then I came across Peru – the photos sparked my imagination: camping, sightseeing, community service. Bingo!

A wait was involved. I hoped my essay would earn a scholarship endowed by a South Kent benefactor, and anxiously waited, hoping for an acceptance letter. "Yes, no..." I wondered. "There are probably a lot of kids who want to do this..." Then the news arrived.

"Pack your bags."

I received an envelope filled with background information, safe travel procedures, and a packing list. My mom and I looked over the material and, as the year drew to a close, my bag expanded. I had never been away from family for more than a week; this would be a month.

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Blake enjoys a reflective moment on an ancient wall at Machu Picchu.



My departure grew nearer. My girlfriend, Danielle, was nervous and so was I. Before I came to South Kent, I never would've ventured anywhere, let alone Peru, but this time I was ready. I was ready to see the world.

**R**ANGE GLOW. Kids gathered at the airport and the sun blazed on the horizon. I took a picture. My heart was ready to go, and I could see sad acceptance reflected in Danielle's eyes and in my mother's as well. I looked at the unfamiliar faces all gathered together, turned and wished Danielle and my mother goodbye. Joining the VISIONS group, I was welcomed by students who were there for the same reason as I – to pursue this passion for service.

Our plane ascended from city lights, flew into a dark night, and then descended into the ridges of the Andes, welcomed by a sun rising crimson on the horizon. Upon arrival in Lima, we rushed to a connector flight to Cuzco. The last part of our journey was a bus ride from Cuzco into Urubamba. As we descended the mountains into the Sacred Valley, it became evident that Peru was not only a different geographic location, but a totally different world.

We unpacked bags and chose our bunks, and before we knew it the sun was setting. The first Peruvian night slumbered heavily upon towering mountains. Beneath innumerable stars, and worn out, I took part in my first *Alljub*, or "community" in Quechua, a local language bearing no relationship to Spanish. Sitting with students from all across the United States, I met kids from California to Florida. All twenty-six of us, including the counselors, introduced ourselves. A candle was lit and burned while we absorbed a new world within the villa.

After just a few days, our diverse group became a family, living, eating, speaking with each other and simply being our true selves. I quickly made friends, playing pickup games of soccer and Jenga blocks. With Molly and Talia, friends from New York, I sipped tea and discussed music, and with Courtney, a close friend from California, discussed our very similar home lives.



Machu Picchu, a young Peruvian friend, and Blake's "sink or swim" introduction to Peruvian apiculture



## Before I came to South Kent, I never would have ventured anywhere, let alone Peru.

Urubamba became a "home away from home."

However, this trip wasn't a vacation. In Urubamba, my VISIONS community worked with *talleres* – bee-keeping, weaving, crafting pottery, jewelry, and learning carpentry – all the while maintaining a consistent work schedule at Paclamayo and Collanos, installing bathrooms, constructing *adobe* walls and digging irrigation canals. We also worked in local communities installing stoves and teaching English.

We hiked to tremendous heights, spoke in native tongues, and explored deep into the Incan culture, as well as within ourselves.

I had never been so anxious to get out of bed. In the cool mornings, I sipped tea with friends. Under the afternoon sun and deep blue sky we worked, and by the orange glow of a setting sun I would sit in the backyard grass and write in my journal: *The painted sky, picture perfect*. Beneath the moon I entertained my friends with a hand drum that I

bought in an ancient Incan market, Písaq. Each day surged with the meaning of life: *Make the most of it*. In the end, I walked away from the orange glow of that final campfire, determined to leave a legacy that will serve and benefit humanity.

**M**Y EXPERIENCE IN ALASKA with the VISIONS program this past summer had a profound impact on me, both in the way that I view nature and in the way I view society. Although it may seem unlikely that only a twenty-eight day trip can influence one so drastically, I assure you that it has. The VISIONS program has a unique way of integrating its applicants into the culture of the native people and giving each student a new outlook of not just another life, but his or her own.



Patrick Fleming, Fifth Former

Pat and some members  
of his VISIONS group  
ice climbing in McCarthy, AK.

I will also never forget the powerful imagery and breathtaking views that Alaska had to offer. Although I have captured many of these landscapes and scenes behind the lens of a camera, nothing can truly substitute the hands-on experience that I was fortunate enough to have. There was one trip we took where we went backpacking for a three day, fifteen mile hike to camp out in a river valley. Although the elements were against us, and it was a grueling distance to walk, essentially uphill, I had an amazing time. I saw everything from flowing streams to mountains, and stone river-beds to crystal-clear ponds. It was during this trip that I learned not only how to build and make a fire, but how to cook and eat moose meat and keep warm in the coldest conditions.

The village I lived in over my stay in Alaska especially helped open my eyes to a different outlook on life. Tanacross, Alaska, is an extremely small Indian village, with a population of one hundred and eighteen people. However, as small as Tanacross was, it compensated many times over with its amount of warmth and compassion to visitors. Wherever I was in Tanacross, I always felt at home; people constantly walked over to talk to me, to ask how our projects were going, and to discuss how life is in the "lower 48". We would have weekly meetings with the village where we had the opportunity to learn from and observe some of their oldest traditions and participate in native songs, dances, and artwork. By the time I had to leave Tanacross, I felt such a flood of emotion that it is hard to describe. Tanacross had truly become a second home for me, and only within four short weeks.

I accomplished things in Alaska that I never would have done in my life. I helped in completing a twenty-by-twenty foot teen center, restoring a shed to working condition, extensive trash clean-up, framing an Alaskan cache, stacking nearly a thousand pieces of firewood, organizing visits to elders' homes and a summer camp, building benches for a local baseball team, sanding and painting picnic tables, shacks, and protective shelters for the players, clearing rocks and weeds, and cutting down and stripping trees for building a village smoke-house, alongside sixteen other amazing students and four remarkable staff members... and none of it felt like work.

Laboring beside the participants in this program not only made me feel wanted, useful, and diligent, but made me looking forward to each day's work. I backpacked over ten miles and

**Visions has taught me  
to open my eyes  
to another culture in the only way  
I would have learned.**

camped out in the cold, Alaskan wilderness on the side of a mountain and climbed the Root Glacier, rappelling fifty feet down a seven-hundred foot fissure in the ice. I have nothing but good things to say about Alaska and the VISIONS program. Not only was this the best summer of my life, but it was one of the best experiences I have ever had. I had fun with an amazing group of individuals while completing projects that will benefit many people for years to come. I have been bettered as an individual and as a young man for having completed this trip and for having been in the presence of such a collection of people. ➔ [www.southkentschool.org/magazine](http://www.southkentschool.org/magazine)

