Summary
Members of the Princeton Class of 1977 financed, purchased, transported and delivered over 500 new wheelchairs to poor and disabled individuals in Peru as our 35th reunion Community Service Project. In doing so we brought together classmates, families, friends and local Princetonians to join together with us in the name of "Old Nassau".

Introduction
This year's wheelchair distribution was our class's fourth international service trip with our partner, The Wheelchair Foundation, and our second trip with our partner, Railroad Development Corporation (RDC). Both partners are led by classmates, David Behring and Henry Posner III, respectively.

The Class of 1977 has a long history of service projects in the name of our class when "Going Back":

(Photo Courtesy of John Merrill)
For our 20\textsuperscript{th} reunion Tom Leyden led us in the construction of a home off of Witherspoon Street in Princeton in partnership with Habitat For Humanity.

For our 25\textsuperscript{th} reunion we answered then President Harold Shapiro's exhortation, "Princeton in the Service of All Nations". Seventeen of us travelled to Guatemala to distribute wheelchairs, medical supplies and school supplies. A smaller group of us travelled that same year to distribute wheelchairs in Vietnam. Additionally we had an on-campus distribution at reunions to 100 New Jerseyans in need of wheelchairs. Approximately 130 classmates contributed funds or gifts or both towards the projects in 2002.

Five years later we returned to Guatemala. With far fewer classmates in attendance, we were able to distribute the same number of wheelchairs efficiently thanks to the use of Henry Posner's Ferrovias Guatemala (FVG) railroad. Our handful of classmates used a "whistle-stop" approach of distributing the wheelchairs at the stations of FVG.

This was a historic trip in the sense that this was the last run of this railroad before it was vandalized to death (We had to stop while on the trip to replace rails that had been stolen for scrap with rails that were carried on board for that purpose before we could proceed.) Guatemala sank into violent chaos and was no longer viewed as a safe choice for additional class service trips.

Methodologies
Before proceeding to report on this year's service project let me review some important points about the way we have worked: Following the advice of the Wheelchair Foundation, we gift wheelchairs to individuals. We do not gift to government agencies or to not-for-profits, although such entities are used to help us identify the individuals with the need for the wheelchairs.

When we give out the wheelchairs we also give a certificate of ownership to the recipient so that it is unequivocally understood that the recipient is the owner. The reasoning is that it is very unlikely that a person who had not been able to move would sell their wheelchair once they had experienced mobility. (The exception to this is when we gifted a small number of wheelchairs to an old age home in Guatemala. The recipients were in their 90s. It was agreed that the chairs would be passed on to others in the home upon their deaths.)

Second, and this we also learned from the Wheelchair Foundation, is that the local Rotary Club International chapters are heaven-sent when it comes to identifying those in need and then helping us handle the local logistics. Their aid was essential to the success of our project as we needed to order the wheelchairs months in advance and then ship the wheelchairs in the correct sizes and numbers to the distributions points.

In particular, we all owe a debt of gratitude to Luis Malaga from the local Rotary Club who worked for months to make arrangements and accompanied us on the bus throughout the week.

Why Peru
Because of the situation in Guatemala and the lack of desire of classmates to travel there given that situation we chose Peru. Henry Posner III's RDC is a major shareholder in the Central Andean Railroad, Ferrocarril Central Andino (FCCA). He not only offered the use of the railroad for our mission, but he promised that it would be the trip of a lifetime for us. David Behring added that there is a tremendous need for wheelchairs in Peru and that local resources including Rotary Clubs, government officials and the military would be available to help us with logistics. There are a number of direct flights to Lima and during our summer months their time coincides with Central time in the US so that we would not experience tremendous strains on our internal biological clocks. Unlike Guatemala, violence and delinquency are declining in Peru. Finally, the overwhelming response from past contributors of money and time was positive.

Fundraising
Funds to pay for the wheelchairs are raised through "soft" solicitations of classmates following the guidelines of the University. This year I set a goal of raising $150,000 so that we could purchase 1000 wheelchairs. This goal was not reached. Nevertheless we did raise approximately $95,000. These funds were used to purchase "regular" wheelchairs that we have donated in the past but we also ordered twelve more complicated and much more expensive "neurological wheelchairs". There is a strong demand in Peru for these wheelchairs from people of all ages with spastic cerebral palsy.

Other Gifts
Classmates brought toys with them to Peru and we purchased more toys in Lima to give away to children at our wheelchair distributions. Additionally, I carried 50 pounds of our 30\textsuperscript{th} reunion bright orange collared shirts with the theme of "Close Encounters of the 30\textsuperscript{th} Kind" to share with our local volunteers as tokens of our appreciation for their help. Joanne Sismondo is happy to have them out of her basement.
Saturday August 4
Kick-off
The night before leaving for the high Andes, we had a cocktail party and buffet dinner at the home of my wife's godmother. We invited local Princetonians-native Peruvians, undergraduates with Engineers Without Borders and a member of the Peace Corps-to join us and we had attendees representing all constituencies. For all I know, with this representation it might have been the largest Princeton event in Peru.

"Princeton in Peru"- FCA Chairman Juan Olaechea in Center (Photo courtesy of Henry PosnerIII)

Sunday August 5
Up into the Andes and our first distribution in La Oroya
We left the Miraflores section of Lima by bus at 6:30 AM with the destination of Chosica where the operational headquarters of FCCA are located. We boarded the wheelchair-laden train and began our ascent through some of the most spectacular vistas anywhere in the world. Our trip entailed numerous switchbacks, and we travelled through and over more than 50 tunnels and 50 bridges. Only recently was the line surpassed as the highest railroad in the world I recommend a visit to www.RRDC.com to experience on a computer screen some of what we experienced on that ride. I also highly recommend watching the BBC video about the FCCA, accessible through the RDC website, "The Toughest Place To Be A Train Driver" or by clicking this link: http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=RspAcV5PbP0&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

At the various switchbacks Henry allowed us, two at a time, to take turns riding with the engineer in the cab of the locomotive in roughly half hour shifts. Henry did not disappoint us with his promise.
Question-What is the best way to cure altitude sickness?
Answer-Go from 16,000 feet to 14,000 feet. (Photo courtesy of Donna Freeman)
The train carried us to an altitude of 16,000 feet. We stopped for a photo at Galera Station. At an altitude of 15,681 feet, it is FCCA's highest station and one of the highest in the world. I estimate that the temperature was in the high 20s (Fahrenheit). At over 12,000 feet in altitude, La Oroya is listed as one of the most polluted cities in the world because of smelting operations that go back 90 years. It is a stark city of gray with the exception of the surrounding mountains bleached white by sulfuric acid formed by the smelter's sulfur oxides combining with moisture in the air.

City Hall was a short walk from the train station and we assembled and distributed wheelchairs in the cold, unheated basement amidst speeches and thanks. For many on our trip this was their first experience doing this but our novices quickly became experts at assembling the chairs and then helping people getting into them. My personal involvement was very limited as I was experiencing severe symptoms of altitude sickness. Nevertheless I could not miss the tears of happiness from the recipients and their families as they received the chairs, toys and shirts that we brought to give them. During the hour or so that we spent there, we heard "God bless you" in Spanish after another. We use that phrase in a perfunctory manner in our country after a sneeze. Here they were truly asking God to bless us. I remember Donna Freeman, who has been part of all of our Latin American trips, recalling that in Guatemala we were told that we were "the hands of God". It is truly humbling. As you might imagine, La Oroya is not a tourist destination and there were no hotels so we travelled by bus for over an hour on a windy and steep road to Tarma where we stayed for the night.

Distribution in La Oroya. Note the coats inside of the City Hall
Marleny Farrell and Simon Sankey with recipient and family in top photo
Henry Posner III, Yvonne Logan and Fiona and Simon Sankey in bottom photo (Photos Courtesy of John Merrill)
Monday August 6
Distributions in Tarma and Cerro de Pasco

We awoke to a sunny sky and, at 10,160 feet in altitude, a relatively oxygen-rich and crisp atmosphere. After a short bus ride, we arrived in the town square to distribute wheelchairs adorned with ribbons and bows, courtesy of our local partners. We were all struck by the kindness of the people and government of Tarma as "Old Glory" was raised to the recorded music of "The Star Spangled Banner". At that point we realized that we were not only representing the Class of 1977 and Princeton University but that we were also ambassadors of the United States. It is a role that we served with pride and distinction.

As at other distributions that I have attended, it is the young child who adapts most easily and quickly to the wheelchair, wheeling back and forth, and turning with their new mobility. Before the gift of a wheelchair, many had only moved by being carried by a parent, relative or friend and we met mothers carrying children larger than they themselves were. The gift of the wheelchair is a gift for freedom for the whole family.

As Henry Posner said in his speeches at the distributions, movement and motion are basic human rights and we were honored to bring this gift to the Peruvian nation. It was an appropriate message from a classmate in the business of moving people through his railroads.

After the distribution, we re-boarded the train near La Oroya and travelled through the high plains of Peru to Cerro de Pasco, passing herds of vicunas, llamas and alpacas. With toots of the engine whistle, our engineer saluted the president of Peru, Ollanta Humala as we passed the monument of Junin where he was addressing the crowd on the 188th anniversary of a battle victory against Spanish forces in the Peruvian War of Independence. After passing the pink flamingos in the high plains lagoons, we began to ascend again into the mountains and arrived at Cerro de Pasco. At an altitude of 14,200 feet this city of 70,000 people is one of the highest in the world. Originally established in the early 17th century after silver was discovered, Cerro de Pasco is today home to the world's largest open pit mine and the mine keeps getting larger every year as it swallows the town. There are scheduled massive explosions of dynamite twice a day causing tremors throughout the town as ore is loosened. Cerro de Pasco was the end of the line for our train ride and we boarded a bus for a short ride to the main town square. Before boarding the bus, we spent time with the crew of the train thanking them for bringing us to the heart of the Andes with care, courtesy and graciousness. There again we distributed wheelchairs and gifts following speeches from Peruvians and members of our entourage.

We left by bus for our next destination, Huancayo, where we arrived at approximately 11 pm.
Tuesday August 7
A big reception and distribution in Huancayo followed by unplanned adventure on the highway

With almost 400,000 people Huancayo is Peru’s fifth largest city. It is at an altitude of almost 11,000 feet. After a long bus ride the night before, we awoke to clear blue skies and a short trip across the street from our hotel to the city square where the wheelchairs were already lined up for distribution. They were ready for us with a full military band that played the "Star Spangled Banner" in our honor along with the Peruvian national anthem. By this time we could all hum along having heard it at the three earlier distributions. For over an hour speeches were made by the dignitaries. The one that struck me the most was by Brigadier General Marco Antonio Jaymez Rebosio of the Peruvian army. He pointed out that people with disabilities are not handicapped and that they should have the same opportunities available to them as those without disabilities. Instead, people with closed minds and bad intentions towards those with disabilities are the ones who are handicapped.
David Behring spoke about the work that the Wheelchair Foundation has done in Peru and thanked everyone for the big reception that we were given. Henry spoke about his railroad and the mobility it was bringing to the Andes and how wheelchairs bring freedom of movement. I thanked the crowd for their welcome and how lucky I was to know the warmth of the Peruvian people because I was married to a Peruvian woman. I explained that these wheelchairs were a gift from our classmates, some of them with us that day but most in the United States. I asked for our classmates to raise their hands and that brought a round of applause from the crowd. By now we were well versed in assembling and distributing wheelchairs and we quickly but with humanity, gifted 110 wheelchairs. David Behring and Marleny Farrell were interviewed for the local television station. You can see them in this video:

http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=YvZnTDuQ4Ak&feature=youtube_gdata_player.

It would be a long trip (8 hours on the bus) back to Lima so after a food shopping spree for lunch and beers at a supermarket we hit the road, retracing in parallel the trip we had taken up into the Andes by railroad. Although we had spent most of our time since early Sunday morning travelling, the hours seemed to pass quickly as we reaquainted ourselves with classmates and families and reflected on our experiences up to that point. Henry had invited non-Princeton friends, Andrew and Phyllis Jennings, for the trip. The Jennings made a good sized financial donation to our project and their expertise was to prove invaluable, especially during the latter part of our trip, as you will see. Andrew spoke about why he wanted to join us. He and Phyllis had a son born with cerebral palsy who was able to live independently as an adult, until his death in his 30s from cancer, because of the mobility that his wheelchair had given him. After many hours of descent, we were passing through a small town, Casapalca, when our bus was stopped by bandits wielding pikes, pick-axes and sling shots demanding money from us before they would let us pass. These highwaymen claimed that they were underpaid miners. Quick action by my wife and our Rotary Club partner Luis Malaga saved the day and a potentially long delay. It was explained to these bandits that we were Americans who were returning to Lima after having gifted hundreds of wheelchairs to the families of miners and that this was no way to treat people who had been so generous. Luis's message and his friendly but firm way of delivering it succeeded and we allowed to proceed without further interruption.
Wednesday August 8
Two distributions in Lima and my special "Gracias" to Luis

Our first morning back in Lima we visited one of Peru's treasures. La Clinica de San Juan de Dios is a privately funded hospital for severely impaired children from all of Peru that would be envied in the United States. Supported by a nationwide telethon and a myriad of fundraising strategies, it receives no government aid. It has both inpatient and out-patient services. Some of its residents have lived there nearly their entire lives. We met a 20-year-old bedridden young man who was abandoned at the doorstep at birth. We also visited their version of the Ronald McDonald House, a rustic building with dormitory style living for the families from the hinterlands to stay in while their children are being treated.

San Juan de Dios was our first location for distributing the special neurological wheelchairs. Somewhat resembling oversized "Transformer" toys, the proper assembly and adjusting were very complicated and time consuming. We were blessed that Mat Finch and Phyllis Jennings were with us as they both work with these wheelchairs professionally. Without them, we would have been lost. After the fitting and distribution of these and the regular wheelchairs we were given a quick tour of the clinic. It was an amazing place.

Josh Rafner, his wife and three children joined our group at San Juan de Dios and Mat Finch and his two children would be leaving by the end of the day. It was a good time to have a group lunch and we invited Luis Malaga and his group from the Rotary Club of San Borja Sur to join us. I had planned on gifting Luis a bottle of Jameson's at the farewell dinner on Friday but after yesterday's bravery I felt that the reward should be more immediate and I presented it to him there. (A bottle of Scotch is a coveted gift in Peru. I am trying to elevate their understanding and appreciation of real whiskey.)

After lunch we did a distribution of wheelchairs in La Molina, an affluent section of Lima. The recipients were brought in from sections of Lima that we were advised were too dangerous for us to do distributions directly.

Clicking on http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=thaakB5tnxQ&feature=youtube_gdata_player shows a collage of the distribution.

At San Juan de Dios (Credits below)
At San Juan De Dios
Upper Right photo-The Rafner Family with recipient and mother

Kelly Lack, Collen Kelly and Bob Lack with recipient
(San Juan de Dios photos courtesy of John Merrill and Bill and Marleny Farrell)
Thursday, August 9
Ancient and more recent Peruvian History

We boarded our bus for a trip north on the Pan American Highway. We hugged the mountain a thousand feet or so above the ocean directly below us. Even on a misty day the sights were stunning. About one hundred miles north of Lima, we arrived at Bandurria, an archeological site. This little visited location is on a bluff overlooking the Pacific and is estimated to be about 5,500 years old and quite possibly the oldest city of the Americas. We were given a private tour by one of the archeologists who had been working at the site until research was suspended for lack of funding.

![Bandurria (Photo courtesy of Marleny Farrell)](image)

We could have stayed there all day given our guide's knowledge and our questions, but we had an appointment at another place important in the history of Peru, just a few miles away. Huaura is a small town but its size is not indicative of its importance in Peruvian history. In November 1820 the Peruvian Declaration of Independence from Spain was signed here and proclaimed from a balcony overlooking the town square by Jose San Martin. We were given a tour of the museum in the building where it was signed. Then we ascended an ancient staircase to the balcony where the declaration was first proclaimed. Across the street were the wheelchairs, a waiting crowd, our Princeton flag and a Fighting Tiger banner. We were presented with gifts and a show of folk song and dance by the people of Huaura. Here is a link to a video of some of the cultural interchange:

Before presenting the wheelchairs I made mention of the fact that Huaura, which had been the historic home of freedom and liberty in Peru was now seeing liberty and freedom of motion given to its disabled thanks to the generosity of the Princeton Class of 1977. Once again, Phyllis Jennings was invaluable with her knowledge of the neurological wheelchairs. As at other distributions, we gifted Class of 1977 shirts and thanks to a hat passed around on the bus to replenish our toy chest, more toys for the disabled children.

Friday, August 10
A missed opportunity for some is an opportunity for others
We had originally planned to do a large distribution of about 200 wheelchairs in Lima. In the past the Wheelchair Foundation was able to do this but a lack of responsiveness from officials in Lima prevented us from doing so. Instead Luis Malaga will ensure that they are distributed according to our guidelines in Huaraz, Cajamarca, Lima and Sullana.
As a result of meeting Peace Corps volunteer Greg Plimpton ’73 at our cocktail party on the 4th, we learned that his town in Peru has need for six wheelchairs and we've been able to supply them (see Greg's notes later in this report).
We closed our mission with a farewell dinner where we reflected on our experiences of the week.

Summary
This has been a two-year project. "No bucks, no Buck Rogers." Thanks to all who have contributed with money, prayers, wishes and time.
A list of the financial donors who made the project possible can be found below.
Written contributions from some of our travellers on this journey are also below.
Below are listed the names of the people who went on the trip and did the hard work and travelled to Peru at their own expense. We came together as classmates through adversity and success during this trip. We engaged with the people, culture and history of Peru. I am sure that for years to come visitors will ask why people are wearing Princeton Class of 1977 shirts if they ever make it up to "our towns" at two and three miles above sea level. We were not tourists and this was not a cakewalk so thanks to all. I am guilty of not writing enough or anything about some of you (for example, to name one person here, Donna Freeman whose skill with Spanish and warmth with people changed lives on this trip). Please forgive me for this omission and other omissions.

Here we are, in rough alphabetical order (classmates in bold):
David Behring
William Farrell and Marleny Farrell
Maturin Finch
Christina Finch
Daniel Finch
I give special thanks to my wife Marleny whose leadership, poise, intelligence and endurance amazed all. She is a great ambassador of her native country.

Our class children that accompanied us impressed me. Congratulations to our classmate parents who have done a great job. If Christina, Daniel, Kelly, Alexander, Laura, Jeremy, Caroline, Benjamin, Fiona and Simon are indicative of their generation the future will be in good hands.

Finally, grateful acknowledgement is made of two Peruvians whose contributions enabled us to carry out this mission, Luis Malaga of the Rotary Club of San Borja Sur and Juan Olaechea, the Chairman of the Ferrocarrill Central Andino. The FCCA was more than a railroad. It transformed into “wings of hope” that carried mobility and freedom.

Thank you Luis and Juan.

“Once again, my classmates have impressed me with their incredible generosity in terms of donating their time, talents and money to helping those in need. The trip brought out the best in our classmates and proved incredibly satisfying, if occasionally tiring. We enjoyed the opportunity to get to know classmates we had never met and bonded with everyone over an extended period of rewarding, shared experiences. The trip was both humbling and exhilarating at the same time. What impressed me the most about the Peruvians we met was the enormity and purity of the love they showed family members needing wheelchairs and the gratitude the latter expressed for their receipt of the wheelchairs. The strength of family ties and the willingness to sacrifice for years to help family members took my breath away. They had very few economic resources, but they had gigantic hearts.”
"Bill and I arrived in Peru on July 24th, 12 days in advance of the August 4th rendezvous date. We traveled to Cusco, the Sacred Valley, Machu Picchu, and Lake Titicaca. We had brought walking sticks with us and did not regret the decision. Steep climbs up irregularly spaced steps, treacherous ramped pavements studded with stones vying for the opportunity to trip the unwary; loose gravel, deep sand, mud. More than once I found myself thinking what life would be like in Peru without two sound legs.

As a teacher of Spanish, I was eager to lend my language skills to the Class service project in Peru. One of my functions was “Exit Ambassador”, speaking with the recipients and those accompanying them. The easy part came first: the congratulatory sentiments and wishes for a healthy, productive, and happy future. Then came the explanation of how to fold the wheelchair for storage and the use of the adjustment tools, repair kits, and tire pumps attached chairs. The most difficult part was explaining how the standard chair could be modified to accommodate a child with a neurological disorder. We had brought special wheelchairs, but the demand far exceeded supply. “Perhaps you can fashion a neck support from cloth, like this, to support your child’s head. A good idea would be to use a belt or sash to keep your child from slipping out of the chair. You could use another sash here, and here, as a safety harness. Maybe a piece of fabric or wood, here, to support the feet.” Thank goodness for the universality of some hand gestures and the eagerness of parents to give the best possible care to their offspring.

As David Behring often says, “Every distribution is different.” Here are some vignettes illustrative of the value of our Class’s service project.

A 13-year-old girl had just received her chair. Her hands were contorted and her gaze cocked to one side. She was struggling to hold onto the bright pink box containing a Barbie-like doll. The girl did not respond to exhortations to look up for her picture. I addressed the elderly woman at her side. After exchanging greetings and names I asked, “Is this your daughter?” “My granddaughter.” I thought it better to err on the side of vanity. The woman looked weary and I was not sure of her age. “How will this chair change your granddaughter’s life?” I asked. The woman began to weep. As the tears reached her jaw line she wiped them with the back of a weathered and calloused hand and said, “Please excuse me.” I would tell she felt shame for crying in front of me. “It’s alright,” I said hugging her. “I can tell your tears are tears of relief.” “Relief,” she repeated. “Relief and gratitude. My granddaughter is 13 years old. Her mother has to work. There is no father. I care for the three children. I’ve been carrying my granddaughter for 13 years. I can no longer carry her.” She paused and sighed. “She is too big and I am too old. Thank you. Thank you, so much.” As we hugged again, I felt the sting of tears in my own eyes. “Gracias, Maim. Gracias,” she said patting my shoulders. “You are most welcome. It is our great honor to give your granddaughter the gift of mobility.” “You have given ME the gift,” said the old woman as she left, pushing her granddaughter with great ease.
A young woman came in, carrying her elementary school-aged child in her arms. She had several children at her side. After exchanging pleasantries I asked how many children were in the family. Eight. The little girl was the youngest. Unable to walk since birth, she was receiving her first wheelchair. Simon Sankey had given the little girl a doll which the mother quickly took and held at her side, half hiding it in the fold of her skirt. “Wouldn’t you like to have the doll in the picture of your daughter?” I asked. “No,” replied the mother. “Today she received a chair. That is gift enough. I will keep the doll for her birthday so she will have a gift.” I was touched by the gratefulness of the mother and the poignant reminder that not all children’s parents can afford to buy them presents on their birthday.

A general spoke at the distribution in Huancayo. Among his words were a few which have stuck with me and will remain with me. There are no physical handicaps, just challenges. These can be overcome with personal effort and the assistance and support of others. There are, however, spiritual handicaps. Those who see need and turn a blind eye and a deaf ear; or those who seek to deliberately harm others. These spiritual handicaps are evil and harmful not only to the individual but to the community.” After his address, the General watched me seat a recipient and listened to the explanation of how to close the chair after use. He examined the contents of the pouch on the chair’s back and paid careful attention to the purpose of the tools. Then he said, “I can help now.” I explained that each recipient was holding a certificate with his or her name and a number. The number corresponded to the appropriate size indicated on the side of each chair. Without hesitation the General found a recipient, selected the appropriate chair, seated the recipient, and explained to her what I had explained to him. When he needed assistance with a larger recipient, up stepped a soldier to lend a hand. I was impressed with the General’s genuine concern, compassion, and willingness to participate in the less glamorous parts of wheelchair distribution. He even got down on one knee to adjust the footrests. I liked the positive example of service he set for those under his command.

When Bill and I toured Lake Titicaca our guide was of Quechan descent, a people living under the dominion of the Incan Empire. I took advantage of his knowledge to explain the unusual events that had been occurring since we awoke. At breakfast, there had been a cloud of incense in the interior courtyard of our hotel. During the cab ride to the Port of Puno we had witnessed many people throw yellow confetti on the heads of friends. As we boarded the launch, a crewman and our guide pelted each other with handfuls of the brightly colored crepe paper bits. When we passengers were settled on the boat, the guide explained it was Pachamama Day. “August 1st. It’s Mother Earth’s birthday. You will see a celebratory dance at the top of Taquile island. We’ll eat fish for lunch since the fish is the symbol for August. And we’ll eat yellow potato soup. You should know that the residents of Taquile still hold to the old Incan ways. Their four laws are simple: Don’t lie. Don’t steal. Don’t be lazy. Today you help me; tomorrow I help you. He went on to explain a strong tradition: Among those who keep the old ways, if you do not provide community service, your voice will not be heard at meetings.

At the distribution in Molina a woman gave a moving speech. I am sorry to say I did not get her name or her title. She thanked us for the gift of mobility and choked back tears as she spoke from her own experience. “We with disabilities are often marginalized by society. Our families love us deeply but we are aware of the burden we place on already stretched resources. These wheelchairs will enable us to participate in the life of our community. Some of us will be able to work. It is a big step toward regaining dignity.”

An elegant elderly woman was thrilled to receive her chair. It was her first. Once an active participate in her community she had suffered a stroke fifteen years prior and had been confined to a chair in her living-room. She was radiant as she ably negotiated her wheelchair through the discarded boxes and crowd of recipients. One last wave and she was out the door: her life no longer on pause.

The distribution at Huancayo was full of ceremony and music. Instead of recordings, the military band played both the Peruvian National Anthem and the Star Spangled Banner. Then, before the speeches began, the Mayor introduced a local celebrity named Elvis. Elvis is wheelchair-bound, but his voice soared as he sang a cut from his new album. What a beautiful metaphor for the human spirit that exists free of physical constraints.

At all of the distributions, individuals and their families approached us to see if there were any more wheelchairs somewhere. It was heartbreaking to turn them away. The need in excess of the supply. As we were getting on the bus in Cerro de Pasco, a young girl came running up to me. “Señora! Señora! My grandmother just arrived and she needs a wheelchair.” She gestured behind her. A man and a woman where supporting an elderly figure: her arms over their shoulders; their arms around her waist; her legs
dragging. “I’m so sorry, honey. We have no more wheelchairs.” The old woman said something to the girl in Quechua. “My grandmother wants to know what country you are from.” “The United States of America,” I replied. She told her grandmother who said something else to the girl. “My grandmother says you'll be back. You'll be back and next time she'll get a chair.”

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The neurological wheelchairs for children suffering from Cerebral Palsy were received with deep gratitude. Thank goodness for the expertise of Matt Finch and Henry Posner's friends, Phyllis and Andrew, whose son had lived his whole life confined to a wheelchair. So many parts; so many features designed to facilitate the transport and comfort of the recipient. One of the challenges we faced was trying to advise parents of children with neurological problems how to use the standard wheelchairs. As “Exit Ambassador” I spent a lot of time with families explaining how to make a harness out of a cloth belt; how to attach a bock or a pad to the footrests; how to fashion a cloth yolk to support the child's head and neck. The language was not the barrier or the challenge, it was the ignorance on my part of what to do. The families were so attentive and eager to do what they could. Many had friends with skills who could help...The neurological chairs are so much more expensive than the standard ones, but the help they provide is priceless.”
-Donna Freeman '77

"From August 4th to August 10th, I, and nine other second gen Princetonians, were able to travel with our Class of '77 parents through the Andes of Peru while helping distribute wheelchairs with the Wheelchair Foundation. We range in age from 10-24, and the oldest of us have been hearing about these trips for the last 10-15 years, from parents and their classmates at Reunions and Homecomings. I was 13 when my dad went on the 25th Reunion trip to Guatemala and thought it was such an incredible adventure. Little did I think that I would end up at 15,681 feet with his classmates in Peru on one of the most exhausting and rewarding trips of my life ten years later.

Our first full day was on Sunday, normally the day of rest. We, instead, boarded a bus at 6 AM to catch the train at 8 AM, where we rode in luxury to La Oroya. Any record of this trip would be completely inaccurate without mention of this train, where we spent two days riding, adapting, conversing, and looking at the most amazing landscapes. In our first 24 hours, the 2nd Gen has already had experiences and seen sights that most people will never get to have or see. We went from 0-15,681 feet in one day by train, got to ride the locomotive (on the front!), were served gourmet food at high altitudes, sucked on coca leaves, and got to see wild flamingos and herds of alpacas (All of our thanks to Mr. Henry Posner ’77 and the F.C.C.A., who arranged for us take a train out of schedule and for taking care of us and our altitude sickness).

The distributions were just as breathtaking as the views on the train, but for entirely different reasons. While we were riding in luxury on the train, and even the bus, we were distributing wheelchairs and toys in places that are among the poorest and most polluted in the world, not to mention the altitude! We were not below 10,000 feet for a few days. Every distribution was different, with a different venue organization, different welcoming posters and flags, and different welcoming gifts. In La Oroya, a giant poster of Señor David Behring along with 25 wheelchairs that needed assembling welcomed us. We were late, but that did not halt the excitement shown by the people of La Oroya, who desperately needed their mobility. This is also where I became the official toy distributor of the trip, due to my ability to speak any Spanish and the fact that I was standing there already. The Sankey twins (Fiona and Simon, aged 11) were my helpers, while Kelly, Alex, Dan, and Christina helped set up and get people their wheelchairs. After the ceremony where we received La Oroya hats and Señor David Behring received a felt tapestry, we traveled to our next stop, Tarma. Sadly, a few of us fell victim to the altitude along the way, including me, so while I am told there was a fantastic dinner and poker tournament, I went straight to sleep instead.

If you have never given out wheelchairs above 10,000 feet, it is hard to explain just how exhausting this process was. We spent the second day giving out wheelchairs in Tarma and Cerro de Pasco, around 50 in total. While the amount was not great, the need was, and we were as tired as if we had done 100. It was very hard to keep up the physical labor, despite the age, so the young ones came in handy, particularly the two teenaged boys! In these two cities, due to the small amounts of wheelchairs, we gave out small things like bracelets and toy dinosaurs to the kids who came to the distributions rather than just toys for the kids receiving a chair. It was great seeing the excitement on the kid’s faces. More ceremonies went on here, with more tapestries, hats, and certificates for Señor David Behring and us. Alex and Dan were in charge of the American flag during the flag ceremony in Tarma and did us all proud. We had fun listening to the speeches and seeing how much more we understood as we continued on. It was also interesting contrasting the speeches of Señor David Behring with Mr. Henry Posner’s...as the week wore on, Señor David Behring’s speeches got longer while Mr. Posner’s got shorter.
Our last day in the Andes was spent in Huancayo, where we had spent the night in the Hotel Susan, an experience we will share and remember for many, many years. Huancayo was by far our biggest distribution, and probably my favorite, a feeling that I believe to be shared by most of us. We had about 100 wheelchairs to give out but this time we had the local soldier unit helping us by doing the initial setup of the wheelchairs and lifting their neighbors and other recipients into their chairs. They also were very eager to learn how to set up the chairs and took to it very quickly. The ceremony was also our favorite, despite the length. Señor David Behring, Mr. Posner, and Mr. Bill Farrell all were honored with bright yellow vests embroidered with flowers and gave speeches, but by far the best thing that happened was that they dressed up Mr. Behring like a doll. As soon as we saw him given the vest, we called out the photographer, Mr. John Merrill to get over there to take pictures. It only got better. He was given one of the traditional shawls that the women carried babies in and one of their hats, along with four dolls. It was at this point that we gave up trying to call him anything but Señor David Behring as our parents all found it hilarious.

The last few days went by very quickly after that. We took a long 8-hour bus ride back to Lima, somehow avoiding motion sickness from all of us, and settled in for two nights. Once more I got sick, missing the Lima distributions at Hospital San Juan de Dios and La Molina, but there we were able to give needed neurological wheelchairs to children who had no hope of moving even with the regular chairs. The last few days were disappointing only in that no one dressed up our leaders like dolls again. The last distribution was in Huara where Mr. Farrell’s wife, Marleny (our Secretary of State!) had quite a bit of family. We enjoyed a traditional folkdance and finished giving out the last of the 500 or so wheelchairs we had brought. We even gained another Princeton family as Jeremy, Ben, and Carolyn joined us and gave us extra help.

In this one crazy week, we got to great heights, improve our Spanish, meet all kinds of people, hear these inspiring stories about how their family and friends would carry these people who couldn’t walk and how much this would help the daughter be able to go to school or the mother who was pregnant again, eat some truly amazing food, stay at very different hotels, see every single town square, see the oldest city in South America (Bandurria), create our own government, and hear about how these very serious men caught sharks and dressed up like priests. It definitely impacted each age group differently, as we had three middle-schoolers, three high-schoolers, and three postcollege adults in the 2nd Gen group. For us oldest ones, this trip showed us how we might be in 30 years and what an impact we could make. It certainly inspired us to push our own college classes to doing a community service project of some kind to correlate with our own reunions. Who knows? Maybe in 5 years, the Princeton Class of ’77 will be doing a joint trip with one of our classes. A lot will happen to us in five years, but one thing is for certain, if we are able to go on this trip again, we will be (yes, Dad, even without you). To the Princeton Class of ’77, thank you so much for allowing us to tag along and sharing your stories, and I sincerely hope that I will get to see you all again before the next trip."

- Class daughter Laura Perkowski

My dear friend Angel and I had a wonderful adventure together, going to Lima to fetch 7 brand-new wheelchairs, donated by the Princeton Class of ‘77 and the Wheelchair Foundation. The new Muni suddenly got unavailable, so – as often happens here – fell back to Plan B. Jumped on the Soyuz to Lima, had some fruit I brought for breakfast and good chats. Missed our stop (my fault) and had to scramble out to the far north side of Lima on a patchwork of over-crowded and under-maintained buses, culminating in a moto-taxi ride to the Policlinica where the chairs are stored.

They were all ready for us, which was a nice surprise. But the shipping boxes were too big to fit in the standard small wagon taxis. Plan B2 – Angel went out and found a small panel truck and negotiated a brilliant fare back to central Lima. We presented a beautifully bound Muni Proclamation and 2 bottles of very nice local Pisco. Angel really knows how to say thank you. He is a pleasure to know and work with. Proud to call him my friend. Jovial and energetic and bright, he always has a good idea and truly cares about making our pueblo the best it can be.

The ride back to downtown was slow and cramped. The explosion of private cars is choking the main arteries. A Teachers’ Strike in city center caused even more delays. The Police were out in full riot gear, with tanks and urban assault vehicles and mounted Cavalry!! Looked ready to repel and army. After an interminable concert of blaring horns and whistles, we made our way to the bus terminal, loaded the chairs below and took the upper front “E Ticket” seats. Angel rounded up some outstanding “Chifa” Chinese take-out and 3 liters of Inca Kola, so we enjoyed a good meal, conversation and vistas all the way home to San Luis. Yes, I even drank the Inca.
The bus, rather unceremoniously dumped us and 7 huge boxes at the side of the busy Pan Am, by the stadium. The Muni pickup being – once again – otherwise engaged, Angel did his usually magic and summoned one of the Muni garbage trucks to ferry us into Town Hall. There, we were greeted as returning heroes, amid busy unpacking of boxes and enthusiastic “test-drives”.

We had to wait until Monday night to distribute the chairs, as the Mayor was out of town and wanted in on the photo - op.

It was a long Monday night, but we got all the wheelchairs delivered. What a mixture of joy and sadness. Handicapped and poverty is not a happy combination. Some of these folks hadn’t been out of the house in a long time. The joy part was knowing that now, they can go to the park or Plaza - feel the sun and wind blowing. Gave me a renewed appreciation for my semi-intact body and made me tear up more than once. The Mayor, of course, made a speech at each stop. And many photos taken of these poor folks for papers, etc. Crowds of neighbors formed at each stop of the Muni truck. It was a pretty big deal. Especially for the folks that got nice new chairs. I was touched by the elderly woman, who kept saying, “I want to go to the Plaza” over and over – at 11pm. The paper and radio carried stories the next day. It’s always a big deal when people get much needed help. Especially so in this case. Grateful to the Princeton Class of 1977 and Wheelchair Foundation for making this possible.

Greg Plimpton '73, Peace Corps Volunteer in Peru

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One of our many bonding moments was spent with John Merrill celebrating his birthday
(Photo courtesy of Marleny Farrell)

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Luis Malaga (in green) transferring wheelchairs from the train to the city hall in La Oroya. Luis was our "man on the ground" and chief negotiator in difficult situations.

(Photo courtesy of Henry Posner III)
Mat Finch With a New Friend (Photo courtesy of John Merrill)