It is said that the friendships developed in college are among the most lasting made in life. The Princeton University graduating class of 1977 certainly shares a bond that might be described as that of a surrogate family. They also share a desire to help make the world a better place to live.

So, it comes as no surprise that at their 35th class reunion, as a class project, they pledged to travel high into the Andes Mountains of Peru to deliver wheelchairs where there are none, and to help some of the most underserved people in the southern hemisphere.

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

The route would include some 50 tunnels and 50 bridges along the way, not to mention the numerous switchbacks. Before the train can leave the rail yard to start its journey back up the mountain, the locomotive must first be turned around. This is accomplished with a locomotive turntable and a little youth energy, provided here by Dan and Christina Finch.

The group makes it to the cool thin air of Galera Station, 15,681 feet above sea level. Until the recent completion of the Qinghai Tibet Railway it was the highest standard gauge rail passage in the world.
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.

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. 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 one '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.

-William J. Farrell, Princeton Class of 1977
Nine second generation Princetonians and I were able to travel with our Class of '77 parents through the Andes of Peru while helping distribute wheelchairs with the Wheelchair Foundation. We ranged in age from 10 to 24, the oldest of us having heard about these trips for the last 10 to 15 years from our parents and their classmates.

I was just 13 years old when my dad went on the Class of '77's 25th Reunion trip to Guatemala, and I thought it was such an incredible adventure. Little did I believe that ten years later I would end up with his classmates, in Peru, on one of the most exhausting and rewarding trips of my life.

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 saw wild flamingos and herds of alpaca.

The wheelchair 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, 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 heard inspiring stories about how family and friends would carry these people who couldn’t walk and how much these wheelchairs would help them. 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 five years, the Princeton Class of '77 will be doing a joint trip with one of our classes!

-Laura Perkowski, daughter of Princeton Alum Ron Perkowski
As a teacher of Spanish, I was eager to lend my language skills to the Class service project in Peru. As David Behring often says, “Every distribution is different.” Here are some vignettes illustrative of the value of our Class’s service project.

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.”

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.”

-Donna Freeman, Princeton Class of 1977