

Leonora Kent , Adult Basic and Secondary Skills  
Turn the World Around:  
Immersion in a Costa Rican Cloud Forest Community

## Introduction

In order to immerse myself in a bilingual culture and explore sustainability education, I spent Winter Term 2015 volunteering and studying in the cloud forest community of Monteverde, Costa Rica. Most of my project took place at the Monteverde Friends School (MFS), a bilingual



K-12 school, where I tutored individual and small groups of students. I focused on developing English language Learning teaching skills, observing community building methods and gathering sustainability curriculum ideas. Also, as part of my cultural immersion, I lived with a local Costa Rican family and studied Spanish with a local teacher. I enthusiastically embraced a chance to familiarize myself with the bilingual, environmentally focused culture as part of my sabbatical studies.

I hoped to have an opportunity to learn more about how to integrate the natural world with the classroom through exploration of the preserves in this area and connecting with local conservation organizations and environmental science schools. Through this holistic approach of observation, study and work, I planned to develop knowledge and skills that would transfer to both the learning needs in my ELL and ABSE classes, as well as our community at Florence LCC.

## Background

It had been a long held desire of mine to visit the Monteverde region. The community is located on Pacific side of the continental divide on the slope of the Tilaran Mountain Range in northwest region of the country. The land is affected by trade winds blowing clouds westward from the warm waters of the Caribbean Sea. As the clouds hit the high ridge of the mountains, they deposit their moisture and dissipate as they head toward the Pacific, creating the cloud forest.

Monteverde has been described as model for tropical rain forest conservation where the "sound of the bellbird's call and images of mist-enshrouded trees long linger in visitors' minds. While the environment of Monteverde is typical of many tropical montane cloud forest regions, the community provides a unique setting because of its biogeographic, human, and conservation history.( Nadkarni/ Wheelwright p5)

The community was founded by Friends (also known as Quakers) from the Fairhope Meeting in Alabama in search of a country and community that supported their peaceful principles.

During the years following the close of World War II they began feel very uncomfortable with the rising militarism in the US. Their feeling that they should seek a new environment was strengthened when four of their young men were sentenced to serve prison terms for refusing to register for the first peacetime draft. One of the most powerful reasons for choosing Costa Rica

was that the new constitution had abolished the country's army in 1948. The government also was encouraging outside settlers to buy land there.

A group of 11 families traveled, some overland, some by air, to Costa Rica in 1951. They searched for land they could homestead and farm. After several months they found an isolated parcel of land in the with a cool mountain climate for grazing cattle. They literally rebuilt the oxcart road as they traveled to their new home. They named the community Monteverde or Green Mountain.

They set about building a saw mill to make lumber for their homes and their new Meeting house and school. The Quakers also established a Dairy coop and Cheese factory to benefit all the farmers of the area. As newcomers, they needed to rely heavily on the knowledge of the local people, who in turn showed appreciation for the honesty and good works of the "quakeros".

Quakers have a policy to conserve and not to destroy, so in an effort to protect the watershed area they purchased and preserved about 550 hectares in the mountain top cloud forests. This area became known as the Bosque Eterno and later became part of the Monteverde Cloud Forest Preserve.

In the 1960s biologists started do research of the flora and fauna in the area. In 1972, George Powell, a predoctoral student was amazed biological riches of the cloud forest, which included the total habitat of the golden frog, a species endemic to Monteverde. It was also the home to many of the beautiful, endangered quetzal birds. He was dismayed by depreciation of the area brought down by hunters and land speculators, so he obtained a donation of 820 acres to begin a preserve.

George and his wife joined forces with Wilford Guindon, one of the local Quaker pioneers.

Together, they approached the Tropical Science Center, a Costa Rican non-profit organization that created private reserves for biological research and education. TSC started an international fund-raising campaign to protect the Reserve. They bought out wooded areas and assumed administration of the property. The total land area of the reserve to over 2,000 hectares, in mostly virgin rain forest.

Today the Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve is the most popular private reserve in Costa Rica. It is one of the best examples of sustainable tourism that you can experience. 100% of the incomes collected by the entrances and other services are designated for educative, preservation and research programs.



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The Monte Verde Conservation League was started by a group of local citizens and biologists in 1986 in an effort to continue to save the threatened forests of the region. After one the members gave a presentation to a class of Swedish children they began a fundraising campaign to halt the destruction of the rainforest. The campaign to buy and protect land became a global effort that extended to 44 countries. Today, with 54000 acres, it is the largest private preserve in Costa Rica. Since children played such a large part in protecting the area, the preserve was named Bosque Eterno de los Niños- BEN.

In the late 80's the MCL also founded the Monteverde Institute as international education & research center committed to study abroad, applied research & community service. The institute's programs are based on the belief that to achieve sustainability—both locally and globally—a combination of environmental, social, cultural, economic, and technological factors must be carefully considered.

Other educational opportunities in the area include San Luis Ecolodge and Research Station, managed by the University of Georgia, a CIEE Study Center and the Spanish Immersion School CPI.

The growth of ecotourism in the last 20 years has been phenomenal, replacing small, single farms as an economic mainstay. Through shared education with the nearby town of Santa Elena, Monteverde has built a bilingual culture that is an asset in serving the 250,000 nature loving tourists that flock to the area every year. The local community continues to fight to maintain a balance between nature and commerce.

## Methods and Processes

I engaged in several methods and processes as part of my studies. As I became involved in the community, I realized I was developing an ethnographic outlook in my research. Below are listed some of my research areas I engaged in:

### Volunteered at the Monteverde School:

The Monte Verde Friends School originally was composed of only the Quaker children. Today, 85% of the school's children are from local Costa Rican families. The school continues to promote the universal values of peace, love and respect in the context of a challenging bilingual education. The school also encourages cultural diversity, and therefore welcomes international students and volunteers from around the world to share their experiences and perspectives. Most of my teaching was with individual students, working with them to strengthen skills. I taught three different preps.



Costa Rican History and Literature Class

- 1) I was asked to tutor an 11th grade US (international) student who had many holes in her math skills and wanted to prepare for the SAT. Like many of GED and Skills Upgrade students from LCC, she had transferred schools many times, so her math skills were never consistently developed. Also, like many of my students she suffered from anxiety and a lack of study skills. I took an online mini course using a developmental approach to linear functions, so I could help her grasp this algebraic concept using everyday problems. This curriculum will be useful for my own GED math classes.
- 2) I also tutored a fifteen year old Costa Rican boy with developmental disabilities and emotional problems. I taught him math using a life skills approach to measurement

activities. I also helped him with reading and vocabulary two days a week. It was necessary for me to work closely with both his classroom teachers, as well as the special education teacher. There were many challenges, not the least of there was a lack of understanding what his skill level and cognitive issues were. (We have many students in our department in ABSE that fit that description as well.)

- 3) Finally, I willingly took on an assignment of teaching English language to a small group from the 1st / 2nd grade class. While all of the students in the class are immersed in English most of the day, these students were not speaking English yet, which is a requirement to enter the 3rd grade. To prepare for teaching them, I consulted a retired elementary level ESL teacher from the Monte Verde community. She highly recommended the Teaching Proficiency Through Reading and Storytelling method of foreign language instruction. This systematic instruction of vocabulary in a highly comprehensible, personalized and contextualized manner is used for all age levels, so I knew I could gain skills and knowledge to improve my teaching to ESL students at LCC.
- 4) Additional volunteer assignments included facilitating a couple of the all-school assemblies, where I taught and led songs. I also worked with high school students in the community garden, assisting the lead teacher to supervise preparing and planting the garden beds.

### **Community Participation:**

During my stay in Monte Verde I had several opportunities to participate in this rich and active Quaker influenced community. I attended the bi weekly Meetings for Worship. One was held on Sunday; the other was held on Wednesday morning so all of school children attended. I also attended a day long workshop on Friends decision-

making processes presented by a well known Quaker leader from

Pennsylvania.



1st and 2nd graders



"Coffee". I also attended the Friends School "Coffeehouse" evening, a community wide attended meal and talent show to raise funds for high school field trips.

### **Cultural Immersion:**

During my stay in Monteverde I lived with local Costa Rican family. The family consisted two parents, Syria and Alvaro and their grown sons, Ricky and Alvarito, both who had attended the MonteVerde Friends School from kindergarten through high school. While the parents only spoke Spanish, the sons spoke fluent English with no accent.

The family also hosted an international student from Canada, Andy, ( who's Grandmother is one of the original pioneers), as well as Ricky's girlfriend, Sarah. Sarah and Ricky met when she stayed with the family as a study abroad student at Monteverde Institute.

The family owns and manages an Jardin Orquideas, a tourist attraction. There are about 500 native species of orchids in the area, and garden grows 425 of them. Alvarito, an architect, designed the restaurant the family leases on the property, Morpho's ( named after the Blue Morpho butterfly).

I was tutored in Spanish twice a week a local teacher, Xinia, who only spoke Spanish to me and lovingly corrected my many mistakes. I had to write essays for my homework, so often I would be assisted by my homestay family.

Other cultural events I participated in were the bi-monthly South American films and the local music festivals held in February.

### **Information Gathering / Interviews:**

To learn more about the history of the Monteverde Community and the development of reserves in the area, I read Walking with Wolf , Reflections on a life protecting the Costa Rican Wilderness I also read selections from the Monteverde Jubilee Family Album, an anthology of compiled stories of the local Quaker homesteader.

I also visited and interviewed " Wolf" Wilfred Guindon and "Lucky" Lucille Guindon , two of the original Quaker homesteaders, at their farm. Wolf has an amazing legacy of stories from his days as a trail builder and security guard for the Monteverde

Lucky and Wolf Guindon Cloud Forest Reserve. He was known by the locals as El Lobo who walked miles days and nights in the forest with his machete. There were men younger and tougher who couldn't keep up with him.

While Wolf was out roaming the woods, his wife Lucky looked after their younger children, and with their son Benito ran the farm. When all the kids were grown and gone, she could pursue her art. Her beautiful pen and ink drawings are mostly of the local strangler fig. Since Wolf's stroke a couple of years ago, Lucky is now the mouth piece for the couple. She shared stories of the early pioneer days when the homesteaders lived in tent cabins and the women helped each other with home births. Through their hardships they built a deep, joyful community.

To gain a deeper understanding of the sociology of the school and how those who participated in the school were involved with the community I conducted interviews with students, parents, community volunteers, staff and teachers from the Monte Friends School.

### **Students:**

Francis is a precocious 14year old, who is above grade level and taught himself calculus. He is the grandson of Wolf and Lucky, so his father is English speaking and his mother is Spanish speaking. I met Frances at my first day at the school, when he sat next to me and translated during the assembly.

Francis shared that he enjoys the culture of the school because it is a tight community and peaceful. There is no bullying ; the teachers keep a close eye out for everyone. He also is pleased that teachers can develop their own curriculum, rather than " teaching to the test" like public school teachers do. As a 10th grader , he enjoys the leadership roles he participates in. High school students set examples for and help the younger children. He also appreciates that all



students participate in the school cleaning and upkeep ( the older ones are the team leaders), changing tasks weekly.

#### Francis and math buddy

Phoebe (mentioned above) is a 17 year old junior . She first came to the region and to MFS as an eighth grader with her parents. They returned to Massachusetts the following year. She chose to return on her own and live with a Homestay family as a sophomore. She needed to go to the Cloud Forest School first, because of her academic problems. In her junior year she was accepted conditionally back at MFS.

Phoebe wanted to live in Monteverde and attend MFS because she loved the bilingual culture and the small, rural community. With her learning disability She felt lost in the big high school in Massachusetts, so MFS with its small class size and attentive teachers suited her needs. She also enjoys the community service part belonging to the school. She was an avid participant in the gardening and building projects.

#### Parents:

Ran is a parent of two children at the school and the director of the board at Monteverde Institute, as well as

serving on a couple of committees for the Friends Meeting. He and his family came to the Monteverde area in 2001, when they bought a local pension in Santa Elena. The

huge tourist boom was just beginning, and by 2006 he and his sister, owned a couple of hotels and a restaurant. Ran shared that the

government at that time wouldn't give a loan for farm equipment, but they would for building a " cabina" on farm property. After the world economy fell in 2009, they need to downsize back to the pension. His wife Nicolette also owns a gift shop.

They were attracted to both the Cloud Forest School , because of its conservation focus and MFS, because of the Quaker philosophy. They chose MFS because they were so impressed

with the pre/ kinder school teacher, Melody Guindon. (She

employs the Montessori method . When I observed her class I was amazed at the interesting subject matter she offered, as well as her brilliant class behavior control methods.) Other parents shared similar thoughts; one referred to her as a goddess whom the children stay connected with through their school career.

Brina and David moved to the area two years ago and bought the local Butterfly Garden ,which houses butterflies from all areas of Costa Rica. They employ and teach apprentices from other counties. All proceeds from the gift shop go to fund an after school science class they offer for local public school children.

They chose MFS for their son because of the high academic standards the school has. Also the smaller class sizes at the school are preferable for his learning differences. However, as new



comers, without long time roots in the past, they have not felt so welcome in the community. As they put it, they have had "rough run-ins with grumpy old people who are stuck in the past". The MFS committee hasn't been open their new ideas for fund raising, for example.

#### **Teachers and Staff:**

Rose, 3rd/4th grade teacher, came to the area to teach at the Cloud Forest School from Ohio about ten years ago. She fell in love with a Costa Rican man and never returned to the States. She was hired a few years ago at MFS as Dean of Academics, before taking her present position teaching last year.

Rose comes from a Quaker background, so she appreciates philosophy of the MFS. Again, as others have mentioned, the tight knit community is one she is more comfortable with as a teacher. She loves the nature oriented lifestyle of the local community, where getting outside and exercising is part of daily routines.

Wilbur Wright is a grandparent of a child in the second grade, and also volunteered temporarily as assistant head of school. He and his wife, Sandy, have a long history of many stays in Costa Rica. They first came as Peace Corps volunteers in the 1960's. When they returned in 1977 Wilbur worked for the Costa Rican Cooperative Development Institute and Sandy worked as a teacher and a volunteer at an orphanage. The couple adopted three siblings, twin toddler boys and a girl with development disabilities brought on by health problems at birth.

Wilbur, Sandy, Kati and Nathaniel

The family returned to the US, but always kept connections with Costa Rica. When they learned of the Friend school's bilingual program a few years ago, they decided to move their family, now consisting of their grown daughter and her son to Monteverde. They have loved the school, but have also been less than pleased with the administration and the school committee's treatment of one of their favorite teachers. Wilbur and Sandy chosen to find community in Eugene, where the grandson will attend a bilingual school.

Zaida, a single mom local Costa Rican or "Tica", is an instructional aide in the 1st/ 2nd grade classroom. She has a long background in tourism and administration, so she is fluent in English. She works at MFS to cover the tuition for her two sons, an 8th grader and a 10th grader. Although she brings home very little in her pay check, she felt it was important for her boys to be educated at MFS.

Zaida is one of six "Tica" staff or teachers that have children at MFS. They would serve wonderful potluck lunches for themselves and their children everyday. There was such beautiful sense of community among them.

#### **Conservation Education and Sustainability Exploration :**



As a volunteer at MFS I was given a free pass to visit local reserves and educational attractions. I visited the famous Monteverde Cloud Forest Reserve. I also visited Bajo de Tigre and the San Gerardo Educational Station ( both part of Abuelas Aventuras the Children's Eternal Rainforest) as well as the nearby second growth Curi-Cancha Reserve.

My long, often wet, hikes were rewarded with views of epiphytes hanging in the canopies of larger trees. I also was fascinated by the strangler fig, that cuts off sunlight and nutrition from its host. As I lived only 250 meters Spotting the Resplendent Quetzal , first in the Cloud Forest Reserve, then feeding on wild avocados in Curi-Cancha,, was a highlight of my trip. My friend and I were startled by herd of peccary ( wild pigs) crossing our path on our walk in the San Gerardo area. We kept our distance as they can be very aggressive. We also got some up close views of both a Green Viper and an Eyelash Viper. As I lived only 250 meters from Bajo de Tigre, I went most evenings to view the sunset over the Nicoya Peninsula. In the mornings there were rainbows in the mist there in the valley and often a bold Blue Crowned Mot- Mot would greet me.

I also toured the Monteverde Institute, observing research projects and interviewing the international education coordinator, Fern. She supplied me with information on course and workshop offerings ranging from Conservation Service Learning to Community Health to Sustainable Development. Fern told me that the cornerstones for the Institute were research, education and community service. She directed me to explore a model created by an intern on using grey water for biogarden system. There is an organic garden there and one of the native plant nurseries in the area.



I visited the other local bilingual private school, The Cloud Forest School. This school was founded in 1991 to meet the need for schooling of children of all the new residents arriving to the area at that time. Also known as the Creative Learning Center, the school has environmental focus. The school has beautiful expansive grounds with a huge organic garden a lovely forested area.

I also visited a local sustainable farm, Finca Life. The farm grew coffee primarily, but also other crops. Life Farm had farm animals, including pigs from which they gathered manure and put in a "biogester". It created gas for cooking piped to the kitchen. The farm also is a site for apprentices training in various kinds of work, including farming and tour guides. Both the Cloud Forest School and Finca Life had been awarded the " Bandera Azul", the blue flag, for meeting criteria in conservation and sustainability practices.

### **Interconnection with LCC students**

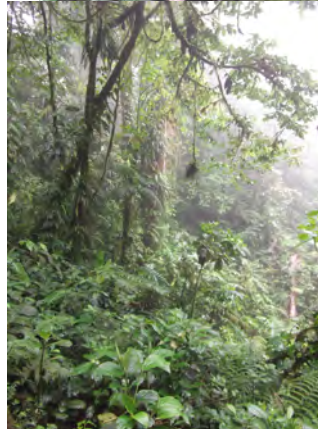
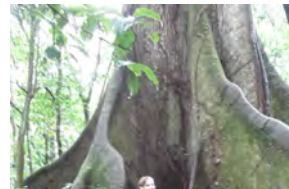


I had hoped for more connection between my LCC student with myself and my Monteverde students. I was able only to connect Phoebe with my ESL student's high school daughter. I did set up a class Facebook account, ABSE Florence, where I would regularly post photos from my adventures and occasionally a link for students to view and respond to. Sometimes they did. The substitute instructor wasn't adept in facilitating technological communications.

## Outcomes

This immersion experience was extremely rich and highly educational. There are many ways that I have gained knowledge and skills:

- I have increased my proficiency in Spanish, mostly getting over the fear of speaking. This is very helpful for communicating with my new, beginning ELL and Spanish GED students.
- I have a basic knowledge of Teaching Proficiency through Reading and Storytelling method. I will continue to use it with my own ELL students.
- I gained greater technological skills, mostly in learning to use my new iPad for all of my computer needs while I was in Monteverde. I now can share digital story telling with my students as well.
- I can also share skills for accessing "the cloud", using the Prezi program and the Easybib application
- With my facilitation, our local public radio in Florence is sending one of their weekly shows to Monteverde.
- I came home with a renewed enthusiasm for gardening and sustainable practices which are joyfully shared by the staff at LCC Florence. We now have a worm bin and a compost pile.
- I have gathered materials and information to develop a water conservation curriculum for use with my GED students this Fall.
- I was so inspired by the plentiful epiphytes in the Monteverde region. I intend to develop research based unit for students to explore our local epiphytes and the niche they have in our biome.



The most important outcome of my sojourn and study experience in Monteverde was the connection I made to the amazing people of this community, as well as its surroundings. While there were some internal problems at the school, the principles of love and respect hold its members together. I felt that I was in my element, living in a simple, sustainable lifestyle in a diverse cultural community.

I continue to remain connected to the community through receiving weekly newsletters from the school, maintaining a Facebook friendship with my Tica mom, Syria and Mari from the community radio station. I enjoy email communications with my Abuelas Aventuras, my two women buddies, one of whom remains at the school as co Head. I had the privilege last month to

meet up with Sandy and Wilbur in Eugene while they visited and confirmed their membership with Oakleigh Meadow Coop Housing.

### **Final thoughts**

What an unforgettable and rewarding experience this sabbatical leave has been! What can I bring back to Lane Community College as my thoughts still linger in those misty mountains? I have been deeply inspired to help my students appreciate diverse cultures. I hope to help them find connection with their environment to learn how to practice sustainability in their daily lives.

I have also offer my LCC colleagues ideas for consensus and community building that can result in positive growth. In the words of song writer, civil rights activist Harry Belafonte, " all of us are here for a very very short time. In that time that we're here, there really isn't any difference in any of us, if we take time out to understand each other. The question is: Do I know who you are, or who I am? Do we care about each other? Because if we do, together we can turn the world around."

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### **Study, Internship, and Volunteer Opportunities in Monte Verde:**

Monteverde Institute. Founded in 1986 on pillars of educational programs, research and community projects. Offers study abroad programs, workshops and internships. Please direct inquiries to [mvi@mvinstitute.org](mailto:mvi@mvinstitute.org)

Cloud Forest School- Centro Educacion Creativa. An independent bilingual school located on 106 acres of cloud forest land. Student teaching and volunteer opportunities available.

[www.cloudforestschool.org](http://www.cloudforestschool.org)

Monteverde Friends School/ Escuela de los Amigos . Operates under the care of the Monteverde Friends Meeting. Prefers volunteers to stay for 6 weeks, unless offering a specific unit or mini courses. <http://mfschool.org/about-mfs/>