



By Jack Wershler
Photos by Ashley Akins

In July 2006, a UVic undergrad returned from seven months backpacking in Latin America with more than travel stories and an empty bank account. She returned with the responsibility of developing two fledgling NGOs.

When she embarked on her journey, Ashley Akins had no concrete plan. "I knew I wanted to explore Central and South America," she said. "I knew I wanted to learn Spanish, and I knew that I wanted to find a place I could make a difference."

Akins, now 24, graduated from UVic in June 2009 with a double major in environmental studies and Latin American studies. She is founder and president of the Q'ente Textile Revitalization Society, as well as co-founder and director of Mosayo Sacred Valley Youth Fund. Both are not-for-profit organizations based in the Peruvian Andes.

The road to Ollantaytambo
Akins' travels began in Central America. She studied Spanish for a month in Guatemala to improve her language skills.

"By the time I got to Peru I could converse pretty well," she said, noting that she was drawn to Peru because of the vibrant history and outdoor adventure.

She followed the well-worn route to the city of Cuzco — gateway to Machu Picchu — nestled high in the rolling Andes. Enrolling in another Spanish school, she based herself in Ouzo for three weeks, taking weekend trips to nearby villages.

One of these trips brought her to the old Inca town of Ollantaytambo. She arrived in the pitch black of night, taking her first impressions in the morning.

"Something about it was way more magical than the other communities," she said. "The mountains surround it, the ruins surround it and you feel so protected."

Akins spent that day visiting the museum, hiking and exploring the ruins. She says she was struck by a contrast of vibrant culture and historical setting.

"It's like this juxtaposition between a black-and-white photograph and this modern, crazy life. Everybody is just talking really loud, laughing really loud, dancing, and there are tons and tons of bright colors," she recounted.

Before heading back to Cuzco, Akins returned to the museum to ask about volunteer opportunities. Two days later, she was moving into a spare room rented from the museum's host family.

Learning the issues
By working and living in the community of Ollantaytambo, Akins made personal connections and learned about Andean mountain culture.

"I have best friends there still. I'll probably always go back," she said.

Volunteering with the museum meant she was able to take trips to the Patazanchu Valley. She visited campesino communities — rural settlements where people speak the indigenous Quechua language, wear traditional clothing and live a subsistence lifestyle.

The main economic activities in these communities are agriculture and weaving. Through collecting textiles to be sold at the museum, Akins was introduced to a rich tradition that was in danger of being lost.

Part of the problem was the refusal of tourists to pay fair trade prices at local markets. For example, a sweater that took three weeks of full-time work to create might sell for only \$30 CAD.

With the sale of traditional textiles becoming economically unviable, weavers seek other alternatives. Since the tradition is passed on orally, if youth don't learn weaving from their elders it could disappear forever.

"[I thought,] this is an amazing tradition and it captures so much symbolic value of the entire Quechua culture, and they are really scared of losing it," she said. "What can we do?"

Akins started the Q'ente Textile Revitalization Society three weeks prior to the end of her trip.

"It seemed small and it seemed like it just made sense. Everyone was supportive, everyone was working together."

Akins says she remembers staying up late on the museum's old computer typing up a proposal.

Q'ente provides a fair-trade outlet in a network of weaving communities. Volunteer staff members purchase textiles at a fair price directly from the weavers. These textiles are sold in Canada at four times the price. One quarter of the proceeds goes back to the weaving community. The next quarter goes back into Q'ente. Akins wanted to put the last quarter toward some kind of project.



A project to grow with

She had another volunteer job at an adventure center as an English literature teacher. It gave her opportunities for her to get to know the people and the area. It was there that Akins met adventure guide Rand Cobart Mejia.

"He's seen over the years... that all his friends barely graduate and then nothing happens, and he has seen a real need for a scholarship fund," Akins said. "When I sensed something that was a central goal for the funds from the textiles, we combined those two visions into creating Mosgoq."

"Mosgoq" is Quechua for "dream." Education is especially important because Ollantaytambo and the surrounding communities are going through a transition of increased tourism and development. Outsiders are coming into the communities and taking the new jobs. Without an education, the youth cannot benefit from the changing economy.

"In my head, the two organizations are basically one," said Akins. "They're completely complementary. Together the groups work to revitalize what she calls the dichotomy of issues by revitalizing the culture while helping to adapt communities to the new tourism infrastructure."

On July 22, 2006, there was a commemorative event held at the altarium. It was organized by the students who were selected for the Mosgoq program. Families came down from the surrounding campesino communities for the party and had a potluck feast.

Akins says it was the first time she realized what she had gotten herself into. "At the end of it, one of the moms came up to me and held my hand, and prayed to me in Quechua, and I have no idea what she said because I don't speak Quechua," Akins remembered. "But then she spoke to me in Spanish and she said 'You have to promise to get my son through school,' and she wouldn't let go of my hand until I promised."

Keeping the dream alive

Less than four years later, Mosgoq has funded 41 students to pursue the career of their choice at a technical institute in Cuzco. They all live together in a house that Mosgoq pays for. The first generations of students have graduated and are finishing their practicum. Mosgoq 3, the third generation of students, will enroll in August.

Mosgoq is more than just a scholarship fund; it is a program designed to create young leaders. Part of the selection process ensures that students have a desire to stay in their community, remain involved with the organization and act as role models for future generations.

Mosgoq has grown to include 15 different partnerships in the Cuzco region. Working with 30 different communities, it supports 300 weavers.

In January, Akins began a community fellowship at the Centre for Co-operative and Community-Based Economy located at House 2 on UVic Campus. Dr. Ana Maria Peredo is an Associate Professor in the UVic business program and is the director of the centre.

"The fellowship is for [Akins] to reflect on how she can build something sustainable. This is her home now and we are happy to have her here," Peredo

said, adding that the centre is a place where community activists can exchange ideas.

Every Friday morning at 10 a.m., the graduate students, faculty and community fellows who work with the centre meet for tea.

"We do it from the research perspective, but bringing together all the people is important because we establish connections," said Peredo.

Peredo is Peruvian, and has worked on community development projects in the Andes.

"The global economy is arriving everywhere, and young people in communities want to have access to these new things," she said. "There is this pressure for having a cash economy and becoming more involved."

Peredo says community enterprises like Mosgoq are important because "they engage in the market, but not in a traditional business-for-profit manner."

"The profits are used for local development, to meet people's needs," said Peredo. "There is a lot to learn for business students in terms of how business operates on the ground. We have big theories in business, but these people have a different idea of what business is, and it's working for them."

UVic volunteers

Jasmine Nielsen is Mosgoq's volunteer director, based out of UVic.

"It's a great time to get involved," she said. "Anything you're interested in, that you want experience in, we probably need help with. Because it is such a young organization, you can get involved as much or as little as you like."

She says that, due to the nature of many students' commitments, the group can always use more help. "Trying to balance Mosgoq with people's schedules is always a challenge," she said.

Nielsen, 22, is a third-year student at UVic, majoring in environmental studies and women's studies.

"Coming from a women's studies perspective I have really been critical of a lot of NGO work. I think Ashley had a very good personal connection with the communities and asked them what they wanted. We've worked to make sure that attitude is instilled in the organization," she said.

Nielsen stepped up to direct Mosgoq's UVic club in January 2008, when Akins went to New York for an internship.

"The learning curve has been so steep. I've learned so much about networking," she said.

The club is an important source of fundraising for the organization. Last semester, events included a benefit concert at Lucky Bar and a textile fair at Christmas. Recently, they held a salsa dancing fundraiser.

The next big event, called the "Last Day of Class Party," will be held on April 8 at Evolution nightclub. Victoria bands Party on High Street, Hillside Hoodlums and Brave New Waves will perform the benefit show.

Nielsen says that, with fundraising, sometimes "you can get really disconnected from what you are doing."

"It becomes all about these events, so it's easy to forget why you are doing it," she said. "Having Rolando here has been wonderful because we actually get to meet one of the students we are fundraising for. He came to salsa night and he's a fantastic dancer, he put us all to shame."

From the Andes to the Island

Rolando Aucapuri Iturriaga is the first Mosgoq ambassador. He arrived in Victoria on Dec. 24, 2009, and is presently studying at UVic.

"I'm taking an English course. I think now I improved my English because when I came here I couldn't speak like today. I have to learn English because we have a lot of tourists in Cuzco," he said.

Aucapuri Iturriaga is from the town of Pachur, a small campesino community of 200 families, seven kilometres away from Ollantaytambo. He speaks both Quechua and Spanish.

He graduated from high school in Ollantaytambo in 2006, and has spent the last three years in Cuzco studying to become a certified tour guide.

"I'm very grateful to have been chosen as the first Mosgoq ambassador from the first Mosgoq group of students, and to be their representative," he said, speaking through a translator. "The NGO Mosgoq is a good opportunity for students to get one step ahead. The people who work for Mosgoq have a great heart helping students who don't have the economic resources to study."

When Aucapuri Iturriaga returns to Peru he will complete his practicum, but he says he still wants to be involved with Mosgoq after he gets his diploma.

"I would like to have a multiplying effect by which I can go to other communities, travel and keep spreading the word, helping find funds and helping other communities and families go through the same process I have gone through," he said.

The big picture

According to Akins, the end goal for Mosgoq is for it to be locally run by leaders like Aucapuri Iturriaga, and for it to be fully reciprocal and sustainable.

In the short term, she says they are playing catch up. "We need to back up and make all the infrastructure ready so this can be a long-term project that people can count on," she said. "We need to make it a business even though it's an NGO. It's the same process."

Another important part of the organization is global education. Akins gives presentations at universities, high schools and elementary schools about global compassion and traditional knowledge. Schools and student clubs have become collectively responsible for sponsoring Mosgoq students. Direct sponsorship is another important source of funding.

Akins says her work keeps her very busy. "It's like a full-time job but doesn't pay," she said. "I'm always behind on Mosgoq stuff."

Akins says her personal connections with Peru keep her from burning out. "They're very close to me," she said. "I will go out of my way to make sure they have a good life. Not because of Mosgoq, but just because I feel like a family member."

Akins says that everyone must choose what they will do in the world.

"I have the passion for working on that particular issue in that particular place," she said. "I have that 'why' — the something in me that my heart wants to do."