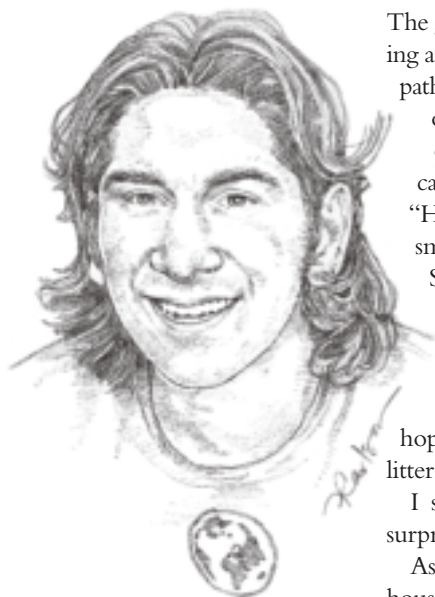


'ALGO PARA COMPARTIR': SOMETHING TO SHARE

By Sartaj Shyam Narang '04



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The girls ran through the streets of Aguirre, laughing as they raced to collect the litter that lined the paths. Catching sight of the girls, the boys took off in the opposite direction, shouting to each other and pointing out the glass bottles, candy wrappers and bags they came across. "Hurry, hurry, before the girls take it all!" the smallest boy yelled in his rapid Chilean Spanish, barely able to lift the bag of garbage that was already bigger than he was.

One of the young girls turned and looked at me, her eyes wide with anticipation. "¿Quién esta ganando?" she asked, hoping it was her team that was winning the litter cleanup competition.

I shrugged my shoulders and smiled. "It's a surprise," I replied in my best Spanish.

As I walked back toward the children's schoolhouse, my boots made a sharp crunching sound. It was my third week in Aguirre—a remote fishing island off the coast of Chile where I had come to help construct a medical center—and I still was not used to the broken white clamshells with which the streets were paved. When I reached the old wooden schoolhouse, I saw Gastón, the elderly town handyman who had agreed to help me out. The garbage that had accumulated over the years on Aguirre's paths, in its drainages and around its trees and shrubs had been collected, bagged and stacked on the back of his beat-up truck.

"This is incredible!" Gastón said, scratching his white beard and gazing at the mountain of black trash bags. Thanks to the enthusiastic schoolkids, we had collected more than 50 bags, or a half-ton of litter. The two weeks I spent organizing the cleanup—talking with the students about the environment, making announcements on radio shows, creating posters and arranging logistics—had more than paid off. "I never imagined we could do so much," Gastón added softly. Though he probably didn't realize it, his words, and the smile that accompanied them, gave me an almost indescribable sense of achievement. The young girl had asked me who the winner was. That day, we were all winners—the children, Gastón and I—because together we had made an incredible difference.

This was the sort of lesson I had hoped for when I decided to take a year off after graduating from Exeter in 2004. Rather than enrolling at Georgetown University's School of Foreign Service, where I had been accepted, I decided to

spend the year doing international social service. Having studied Spanish at Exeter, I focused on the region of Latin America. Before arriving on Aguirre, I spent three months teaching English in the Peruvian highlands, in a village of mud houses and dirt streets outside of Ayacucho, and a month in Costa Rica, where I helped build homes in San Ramón with Habitat for Humanity. My three months in Chile were spent working with a London-based charitable organization called Raleigh International, which sent me to Aguirre and to a small frontier town, where I helped to build a hiking path and to raise awareness about recycling. The trip concluded with a memorable three-week trek in the Andes, where, along with 10 others, I made my way across 100 kilometers of desolate mountain terrain in bone-chilling temperatures.

My year has left me with many lasting impressions, but none stronger than a conviction in our capacity, even at a young age, to bring about change. After all, no one on the island of Aguirre—not the mayor, not the NGO that worked there, not the fishermen who lived there—had made a real effort to clean up the trash, even though many of them regarded it as a "great problem." In the end, it took a student volunteer to realize that the solution was to involve the children of the island, who were proud of their town and eager to keep it clean!

My experience on Aguirre was certainly unique, but such insights into our ability to give back were common throughout my gap year—one of the most exciting and challenging times of my life and a choice I would recommend to any Exonian. I learned a lot at the Academy—at the Harkness table, and in my work with Student Council, ESSO and with the *Exonian*—but one of the things I learned is that there is only so much we can do in the classroom. While delaying college and taking an alternative path was difficult, it was my Exeter experience, with its emphasis on individual initiative and community service, which allowed me to choose such a path and to gain a perspective on my journeys. I credit the Academy with pushing me to take the time off and to pursue my education in new classrooms, including the island of Aguirre. ●

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