

Ben learns about real poverty from his little friend Manuel

by Benjamin Gunn-Doerge

PIGGY-BACKING IS FUN

*Ben, who is 16,
learned about the
reality of poverty
through his friendship
with a family
of 10 children living
in a one-room
shelter in the
mountains of
Ecuador.*



Before I travelled with Free the Children to Ecuador last summer, I thought I knew what poverty meant because I read the newspapers, watched the news, read the “facts”, was on my school’s church and social justice groups, and people called me the social justice guy. But the truth is I had no idea. Poverty is so much more than what you see on the news. You truly do not know what poverty is until you live in it and see it with your own eyes. Let me tell you a story about poverty.

When we first arrived at the village of San Miguel, our group was shocked by the poverty. It was so far from my idea of reality. Then I meet this boy named Manuel. Manuel was shy and didn’t talk much but, when I started talking to him, we became great friends. Manuel had nothing in worldly goods. He was one of 10 brothers and sisters who all lived in a one-room house. Yet he never complained and always wanted to help. He was there when we painted desks for their elementary school, when we built a soccer field, when we made cement for the school’s sidewalk.

And he was always there with a smile. He understood how important it was for him and his younger siblings to have an education and a soccer field to play on. Before this trip, I took these things for granted.

Poverty is more than facts because those facts have faces. When I see the facts, I think of Manuel and poverty has a much bigger meaning—

--because I made a secret handshake with Manuel who is one of the 800 million people who go to bed hungry every day...

--because I helped dig a water system with Manuel...

--because Manuel or his little brother may be one of those who dies every 11 seconds because of lack of access to clean water, or one of the 10.5 million children who die from preventable causes before their fifth birthday.

For me, poverty now is real faces and real people.”

Benjamin Gunn-Doerge, who is 16, and his twin sister Daniela, spent more than two weeks in Ecuador this past summer working for Free the Children, a movement started by Craig Kielburger in 1995, and now in 45 countries. Its primary aim is to free children from poverty and exploitation.