

Finding life in the Amazon

By AARON JAY LEDESMA, Marquette '14

“Life ... you could just feel it,” said Jack Rodenburg, Nebraska '16. “That was the most incredible thing about our journey. Never before had we heard so many insects or birdcalls. We were at the mercy of the rainforest.”

Rodenburg walked silently through the Amazon with his brothers by his side, each step introducing a new experience as they made their way to the Archua village of Tiinkias.

This band of Nebraska brothers never imagined they would travel abroad together, and certainly never dreamed of journeying so deep into the jungles of the Amazon. Fortunately, they were led by Dean Jacobs, world traveler, former pharmaceutical executive and sharer of the biggest adventures on earth.



Two years earlier, Deb Mullen, faculty fellow at the Nebraska Alpha Residential Learning Community invited Jacobs to visit the chapter as a guest lecturer. The men were enthralled by his Amazon adventures and begged for the chance to join him on a future expedition.

In May, Jack Rodenburg, vice president of programming, and nine other brothers got their chance and followed Jacobs on a two-week journey through Ecuador. They would visit with the indigenous tribes and explore the depths of the Amazon Rainforest.



The elements of life

The expedition into the Amazon began in the Andes Mountains. It was there, in the shadow of a dormant volcano, that the brothers found the village of the Caranqui tribe. Though the tribe was more modernized than those they'd meet deep inside the rainforest, they did have their own rich culture they were trying to maintain.

Rodenburg and his brothers experienced the tribe's intimate connection with nature, participating in a ritual unique to the



Deep in the Amazon Rainforest of Ecuador, brother Joe Gomez, '17, has his face painted by a young Achuar girl in the village of Tiinkias.

Andean people. The group encircled a woodpile and lit the fire from the north, south, east and west. Then, they placed volcanic rocks, called “abuelas,” in the fire. Once hot, the villagers took the rocks inside a sweat lodge, and splashed water on them, creating steam.

“The whole point is to appreciate and to become one with the earth,” said Rodenburg. “Four rounds of rocks represent the elements: earth, wind, fire and water. Each time they brought a rock in we would say ‘aahoe,’ which is their way of thanking the earth for this experience.”

When they climbed out of the sweat lodge, it felt as if they were taking their first breath of fresh air. “It was inspiring and life-changing,” said Rodenburg. “We lay there on the ground and felt the air and the world around us.”

The ritual was exactly what Jacobs had in mind. “I wanted them to really experience another culture and a different viewpoint of the world,” said Jacobs. “What you’re really touched by is the human connections you have when you visit new places. Typically that takes time to develop. My intention was to create an experience that set up the framework to make that connection happen faster.”

Jacobs’ plan succeeded. The group’s immersion into the Caranqui culture broke the ice for the remainder of the trip. After spending a few short days in the Andes Mountains, the journey to the Amazon began.

Into the deep

“We boarded two small planes and flew off a dirt runway into the Amazon,” said Rodenburg. “All we could see were trees for miles. I’ll never forget that moment. The vastness of the forest overwhelmed me.” Jacobs was taking the men to meet the Achuar, an indigenous people with an ancient Amazonian culture.

Having carried the group as deep into the rainforest as they could, the planes finally landed in the middle of a village. The group embraced the service mission of the trip, and delivered a year’s worth of school supplies during their brief stay in the port village.

“It was there we met the shaman,” Rodenburg recalled. “He is regarded as having access to, and influence in, the world of good and evil spirits. He welcomed us to the Amazon as we began our

hike to Tiinkias,” an Achuar village in the interior jungle.

With the spirits on their side, Jacobs guided the brothers along a dense forest path that led to the river.

The group guided canoes down the winding waters that led to the village. When they arrived, two rows of children had lined up to welcome them. “They had been standing there for several hours,” Rodenburg said. “They welcomed us and painted our faces the moment we made land.”

The villagers would end their day at nightfall, but the men were too excited to sleep. Lying in open-air huts, only nets

separated them from the Amazon night.

“As soon as the sun went down, another world awakened in the rainforest,” Rodenburg recalled. “It was so loud. Birds, frogs, insects, and who knows what else. The sun went down, but the volume went up. I loved that moment. I just listened until I fell asleep.”

In the days that followed, the group lived and worked alongside the Achuar people. They played with the children and fished in the nearby waters. The Achuar gave the men a new appreciation for life. Seeing people with so much less material wealth live such happy lives left a lasting impression on Rodenburg. “Nothing bothered these people,” he said. “All that mattered was being alive. They are the happiest people I’ve ever met.

The fondness Rodenburg felt was mutual. As the group departed, a village woman gave a heartfelt speech. The translation: “Please come back, please, for we shall not forget you.”

Bringing the journey home

“I gained so much from this trip,” said Rodenburg. “The Amazon reshaped my views of the world. Watching the indigenous people in their own environment gave me an appreciation for the natural beauty of life.”

“Our principles were put into practice every day from the moment we woke up,” said fellow traveler **Daniel Jordan, '15**. “Virtue guided us to help these people and expect nothing in return. Diligence helped us accomplish the tribe’s daily activities like plowing fields, cutting down trees and planting seeds. And brotherly love brought us together throughout the trip. Thirty years from now we will still have this experience.”

What did this journey hold for Jacobs? An opportunity to help young men see with new eyes. “I have been asked several times to lead a group on a trip. I saw a group of men who seemed hungry for an experience that had the potential to change and impact their lives in a positive way. They were mature about it and expressed a willingness to listen and trust. I’m not going to have my own children, but if I were to have a son I would hope he would be like these SigEps.”