Victorson enjoys year in Spanish culture

By PEARL HENRY
Lifestyles Editor

ESCANABA — What do you do if you want to learn Spanish? One answer might be, move to Ecuador.

That's what David Victorson, son of Donald and Sue Victorson of Escanaba chose to do for a year.

A 1990 graduate of Escanaba Area High School, David attended Augustana College in Rock Island, Ill. In 1994 he graduated with a degree in English.

David learned of a program where teachers teach English as a second language in Ecuador. Wanting to learn Spanish, and interested in experiencing the culture of another country, he signed on for the one-year teaching program in Ecuador.

He receives a stipend to pay for his necessities. However, "It is basically more experience in life than a money maker," his mother said.

According to Sue Victorson, David has met other college graduates there. They teach at Centro, the Center for InterAmerican Studies. David teaches English to young adults.

"This is his third segment," said his mother. "The last teaching segment will be over Aug. 15, then he will return to the States on Aug. 19."

Sue Victorson and her husband, Don, are happy for their son's experience. However, Sue said like all parents who have children out of the country, they worry about his health and safety and just like to know he is okay.

David is staying in Cuenka, which is in the mountains. He reports it has a mild temperature, consistent year around. During his six-week breaks between class segments, he takes trips to the beaches, the mountains and other towns.

One trip took him to Peru. He returned home to Ecuador just as the border was closed due to the outbreak in hostilities between Ecuador and Peru over land.

Sue isn't sure what her son is planning upon return from Ecuador — whether it will be further education, or looking for a job. But she is sure that with this glimpse of another culture, international travel will have a strong pull.

This past school year, for Global Awareness Week, the Escanaba Area High School Spanish class wrote to David asking him what it was like for a Delta County person to be in Ecuador. He wrote back about his experience.

His story is published here.

SITTING ON TOP OF THE WORLD —David Victorson of Escanaba enjoys a trip to the mountains with fellow teachers during a recent break from his English as a second language class in Ecuador.

A gringo view of a culture foreign to Escanaba man

By DAVID VICTORSON

If you go to Ecuador, it is important to take a train at least once. And when you take a train ride in Ecuador, you have to sit on top. The actual cars are so sardine-can packed with indigenous (native) farmers and their baskets filled with grapes, oranges, potatoes, corn, sugar cane, chickens, roosters and guinea pigs, that unless you're willing to share your space with smashed tomatoes, two chickens and a rabbit on each lap, (which is impossible to avoid sometimes) it is much more comfortable to just brush off a spot above and take a seat.

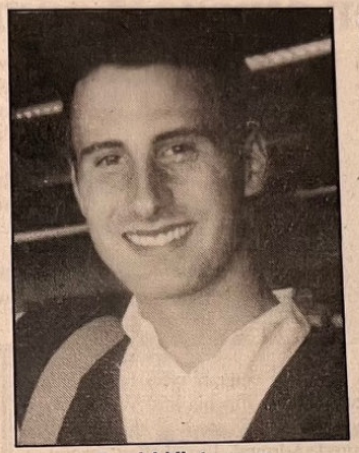
However, more importantly, when I say, "you have to sit on top," it is so you can grab hold of huge, wet banana leaves as you go clickity-clackiting through the rain forest, passing bright red, green and yellow blurs of giant macaws, toucans and exotic flowers — things I've only seen before on the front of Fruit Loops cereal boxes or "Gilligan's Island" episodes.

You have to sit on top to see the view as the train escalates higher and higher into the Andes mountains, passing through clouds and pitch-black tunnels. You have to sit on top so you can play dodge-the-large-rock or overhanging branch games, or so you can experience Ecuador's version of "Great South America's Amusement Park" because the train hugs the edge of the cliff so tightly that you have to look in the other direction.

But don't get me wrong. Everything here hasn't been all Magic Mountain fun and adventure. So much of my understanding and adjusting has been through some type of unusual embarrassing or bizarre situation.

The train eventually stops and you help an old, leathery indigenous man struggle to climb on the roof. He has a large gunny sack of roots tied to his back, and a red gasoline can under his arm. He smells like smoked beef-jerky. You extend your hand to help him aboard and practically lift the old man on top. Out of gratitude, he thrusts the red gasoline can in your face and motions for you to drink from it. A bit hesitant, you look around and see every indigenous person watching you with suspense to see if the *gringo* will take a drink or not.

You decide to go for it, and slowly bring the nozzle up to your lips. Your eyes begin to water and your nose starts to burn from the fumes. You drink. It feels like acid going down your throat...you swallow...COUGH-SPIT-SPRAY!



David Victorson

It was sugar cane moonshine which they call *punta*.

The old man laughs proudly and puts his arm around your shoulder. When he smiles, you see his teeth which remind you of corn nuts. He begins talking, and you can hardly understand a word he says because his Spanish is mixed with Quichua, the native language of the indigenous people. But eventually you get the hang of the conversation and you know it will be one of the best chats you'll have.

When I arrived in Ecuador, I had no idea what to expect, nor did I know how to speak Spanish. Apart from a few verbs, all I could really say was "My name is David. How are you?" and "Goodbye." But that's all right. One quickly adapts. It's like being forced to breathe under water. At first it's impossible and frustrating, and it hurts. But after a while you suddenly develop gills and you're actually communicating in a different code about the weather, a soccer match, or where you can get a good shrimp dinner. However, all of this is impossible unless you open your mouth and make mistake after mistake after mistake.

I walked into a store to buy a Coke one day and started making conversation with the two women working behind the counter. After a while, they asked me if I had a wife, which in Spanish is *Esposa*. But what I had heard was *Bolsa*, the Spanish word for bag. In response to their question I said, "Yeah, I have one, but it's getting pretty old. I need a new one. Do you know where I can buy a better one?" The looks on their faces immediately told me that I had somehow misunderstood them.

Besides the language, the food is also quite an experience in itself. The typical dishes of the mountain region consist of rice, potatoes, meat and soup. But on occasion, the people eat guinea pig or "cuy" which is quite a delicacy.

I was walking home one evening and I happened to bump into a soccer team who had just won and were celebrating. They took me back to one of their homes and we roasted cuy on a spit. At first, when I saw these skinned little rodents rotating over an open fire, I thought I would be sick. But after time, they turned a delicious golden brown color, and their taste was a scrumptious combination of pork and chicken. Who'd have thought?

I could go on and on about all the crazy adventures, bizarre situations and growing experiences that living in another country can create. But to me the most exciting adventure isn't fishing for piranhas in the jungle, mountain climbing on snowcapped peaks, or dancing on tropical beaches. The best adventure of them all, is the people who live there. To me there is nothing more exhilarating than making a connection and discovering how differently similar we all are.

Experiencing other cultures can be like sitting on top of the train. It can be scary, a little dangerous at times, and uncomfortable. But the change of perspective, the incredible view, makes everything worth it.