

# Sonoma

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## Adventure to the Andes inspires decades of change

Monday, October 14th, 2013 | Posted by [dhart](#) | [no responses](#)



Rae Lewis, left, and Ruth Milagros Uribe Barrios at the Chicuchas Wasi Alternative School for Girls in Cusco, Peru. (Photos courtesy of Rae Lewis)

By DIANNE REBER HART / Sonoma Valley Correspondent

When Rae Lewis set out to hike the Inca Trail in the 1980s, she imagined an adventure she'd never forget. She just never imagined the adventure would continue for decades to come.

While visiting the ancient tourist city of Cusco, Peru, near the Andes mountain range, Lewis was stunned by the hundreds of street children she encountered.

Many were abandoned and alone, hungry and struggling for survival. Lewis, a registered nurse with three grown sons back home, couldn't turn away.

"The street kids won my heart and I made a promise to do something to help," she said.



A student works on a watercolor painting.

Nearly 30 years later, Lewis, 70, has changed the lives of countless impoverished Peruvian children, even impacting future generations. Touched – tormented even – by the plight of so many indigenous children, Lewis came home to Sonoma only to return to Cusco with seed money raised by friends and colleagues at Kaiser Permanente in Santa Rosa. She established the nonprofit Chicuchas Wasi Children's Project in 1987, first with an emergency shelter for street children and later expanding the effort into a free, private school for high-risk girls.

Lewis lived in Peru for 10 years to oversee the project, selling personal assets and securing donations to fund Chicuchas Wasi.

With guidance from Ruth Milagros Uribe Barrios, a compassionate and well-educated Peruvian teacher, Lewis realized she had to address the core problem resulting in such widespread child abandonment.

“Really the problem underneath is that the girls aren’t educated,” Lewis said. “Grandmothers and mothers passed along information that girls weren’t important enough as a boy child.”

Barrios had the cultural understanding that poor, uneducated indigenous women had little value in the society. With few skills, they rely on men for their sustenance, even at the cost of abuse or abandonment of themselves or their children.



A teacher and her students wear traditional Peruvian attire for a special day of celebration.

“These girls already have a lot of tragedy in their life,” Lewis said.

She and Barrios hoped to lessen the cycle by educating and empowering the girls and their mothers. In just 16 years, they’ve seen a world of change.

“It’s an incredible achievement. These same girls have already changed so much,” Lewis said. “The heart of our project is love, which is what they’re all longing for. Love, respect and dignity are the pillars of our school.”

The Chicuchas Wasi Alternative School for Girls has grown from 13 kindergartners to 100 students through sixth grade; from Barrios pleading with mothers to enroll their daughters to a long waiting list today.

Lewis is the school founder and board president, Barrios is the school administrator. There are volunteer boards in Cusco and Sonoma that work collaboratively to oversee the school and its annual budget of \$131,000.

An anonymous donor from London heard about the school and was impressed enough with its success to fund the construction of a permanent school in rural Cusco last year.

The school features eight classrooms, a multipurpose room and a kitchen and dining room where students are served their main hot meal of the day. For some, it's the only full meal they get.

Few students are from suburban homes in the city of Cusco. Many girls are raised by illiterate mothers in single-parent homes, mostly from the rural region where families speak in native dialects and lack basic utilities.



Rae Lewis with some of the youngsters from the original Chicuchas Wasi project she established in 1987.

“We’re talking dirt floors, no running water, five people living in one room,” Lewis said.

The accredited school provides transportation and teaches academics and personal development while reinforcing the message of self-worth.

Parenting classes also are offered.

“The mothers are changing,” said Barrios, 47, who was in Sonoma recently helping with fundraising and administrative needs. “Already their self-esteem is growing and the other children in the home are benefitting as well.”

Most importantly, Barrios said, the girls are healing from their backgrounds of neglect, abuse and shame.

“If you don’t heal this part,” she said, both hands on her heart, “then how does it serve you to read and write?”





School girls take a break from their studies. There is now a waiting list to attend the school.

For Lewis, the impacts of that long-ago hiking adventure are seen in the smiling and often-studious faces of the Chicuchas Wasi students. Her own adopted Peruvian daughter is now 33 and a registered nurse in Santa Rosa, once an abandoned 7½-year-old Lewis was compelled to help.

Lewis wonders if the sacred grounds of the Andes somehow led her to help children in such great need.

“There’s a force driving every (Chicuchas Wasi) project that’s bigger than the people involved,” she said. “Peru was never on my radar. I think I was destined to do this.”

*Chicuchas Wasi presents a benefit “Celebration of Andean Music and Dance” featuring Bay Area musical groups Trio Chaskinakuy and Colectivo Anqari from 1:30 to 5 p.m. Sunday, Nov. 10 at the Sonoma Valley Veterans Memorial Building, 126 First St. W. Wine, soft drinks and Peruvian small bites served during the pre-concert reception. Silent auction includes Peruvian folk art.*

*Tickets are \$35, \$10 for kids under 12, at [chicuchaswasi.org](http://chicuchaswasi.org) or by calling Rae Lewis at 939-7162. Visit Chicuchas Wasi on Facebook.*



Students await promotion ceremonies at their school. Most girls are from the rural mountain area above Cusco, Peru.