I was lucky enough to have my first experience in Ecuador at only fourteen years of age in the summer of 2009. A few years prior, the church I attend had decided to begin a partnership with a small church in an impoverished community called Carmen Bajo, situated on the outskirts of Ecuador’s capital city, Quito. To say that the twelve days I spend there were life-changing only begins to describe the impact they had on me. My comfort bubble was rapidly popped and my North American view of the world sufficiently altered in the best way possible.

Maybe one of the most tiring weeks of my life, our team got dusty doing construction, mastered the art of bracelet-making in vacation bible school, attempted to catch our breath at 9,350 feet above sea level, found new friends that felt like family, and tried in vain to decode the magic behind the Spanish language.

Coming back to Canada, one of the most prominent thoughts in my mind was that Ecuador was not done with me yet. Thankfully I happened to be right and since then, I have been back five times. Each experience has been unique and unforgettable, and I would not trade them for anything.

This past summer I had the opportunity to intern for an organization in Quito called Youth World and lead teams that came to work in Carmen Bajo. Easily the best summer of my life, I found my niche working alongside the team members and translating anything and everything from instructions to conversations, games to sermons.

In a few months, I will be fortunate enough to once again travel to the place that has so easily captured my heart. I cannot even begin to imagine who I would be today if I had never experienced Ecuador, and I am proud of how one tiny community in South America has shaped me so profoundly.

This year I will be able to hold English as a second language classes for adults in Carmen Bajo who wish to learn but otherwise do not have the means to do so. While I will not be so involved with teams, I will help them in any way I can when they are in the area, mostly with translation for children and youth programs. I am especially excited for the chance to work more closely with the group of teenagers and young adults at the church and to carry out special events and activities, including an end-of-summer retreat that I have been helping plan.

Even more than the tangible, story-worthy things that I will be doing, I cannot wait to simply spend time with the people who have graciously called me one of their own and welcomed me time and time again with open arms. I call them my family and in truth, that is what they are to me. The kilometers between may be many, but really that does not make things different, just at times inconvenient. I truly am blessed to have found my place in Carmen Bajo and I am counting the days until my feet touch Ecuadorian soil once again.