

Posted on Fri, Apr. 19, 2002

THIS CAT IS GOING PLACES

Two years in Peru were best of Boone's life

By MARK STORY

HERALD-LEADER SPORTS COLUMNIST

So this, he figured, is what it felt like to be pregnant.

The kicking in Aaron Boone's stomach was so sharp it felt as if there were something alive inside.

His nausea was so toxic he'd thrown up 28 times.

When he caught sight of himself in the mirror, his belly was so engorged that "I honestly looked like I was having a baby."

Worst of all, he had no idea how to pick up a phone and call a doctor.

In the spring of 1997, Aaron Boone had signed on to spend two years of his life on a Mormon mission.

The church had taught him some rudimentary Spanish and sent him to Peru to proselytize and serve.

Today, the University of Kentucky's senior wide receiver will tell you that those two years in some of the poorest areas of South America "were the best two years of my life."

That first week in Peru, the Fillmore, Utah, native felt so bad, he just hoped not to die.

So this is what it felt like to live life at a radically slower pace.

A life of primitive technology. A life minus North American hygiene standards.

Normally, Aaron and his missionary companions would rent rooms from families.

In many instances, Aaron found himself living in houses built of adobe. Houses with dirt floors. Houses that sometimes did not have running water.

Often, you would do laundry by hand. Sometimes, one showered by dumping a bucket of water over one's head.

Some families had toilets. Others had only a hole in the ground.

Other homes had outhouses.

The rats were so bad, he learned how to use a slingshot so he could kill the ones he encountered on the way to the outhouse.

So this is what it felt like to be different. To be submerged in a foreign culture. To always stand out as a result of the way you looked.

Boone's mission took him to different towns in Peru. From his base in Trujillo, he made a  
26-Dec-02

stop in Chocope, a sugar-cane village where the mosquitoes were so thick at night that he had to burn incense to keep them away.

It was in Independencia, a more developed city, where he truly mastered the Spanish language.

In Chimbote, a fishing village along the Pacific coast, the smell of tuna seeped into everything in the city.

"It just stank," Boone said.

In Rio Seco, Boone survived a flood caused by El Nino.

In Huaraz, a mountain city with a large Indian population, Boone was exposed to people who spoke only an ancient Inca dialect, not Spanish.

At 6-foot-3, 215-pounds (when he arrived in Peru; he would lose 30 pounds while there), Boone towered over the Peruvians.

The locals thought he looked like Ivan Drago, the Russian "boxer" played by Dolph Lundgren in *Rocky IV*.

"Wherever I went, they called me 'Drago' or 'Russo,' " Boone said. "It was weird."

So this is what it felt like to be scared. Not Stephen King scared. Not roller coaster scared.

This was, I-might-not-live-to-see-the-dawn scared.

Aaron Boone was trying to sleep amid a knife fight.

He and his Peruvian missionary companion -- Mormon missionaries always travel in twos -- were in Rio Seco, an impoverished area of high unemployment.

Aaron noticed immediately there were always idle men congregating on the streets. Many were apparently members of gangs.

When the knife fight broke out, the missionaries were trying to fall asleep in a school in which they rented a room.

They were lying on their backs looking up through the windows at the faces of angry men breaking bottles to use as weapons.

Aaron could see men swiping with knives.

He heard gunshots.

Only two weeks before, someone had been killed not a block away from where they were sleeping.

"It was scary," Boone said.

On this night, at least two missionaries were devoutly engaged in prayer.

So this is what it felt like to eat a guinea pig.

It was Jan. 13, 1998 -- Aaron's 20th birthday -- when he walked into the kitchen of the home in which he was living. The woman of the house was holding a dead guinea pig by the tail and dipping it into a pot of boiling water.

She was slowly peeling the fur.

Turns out, guinea pig is a Peruvian delicacy.

"I loved it," Aaron said. "It was one of the best meals I ever had."

They had told Boone in the missionary training center in Provo, Utah, to eat whatever he was offered when he visited a home in Peru.

Not to do so would be an affront to a proud people, he was told.

That was why -- during that very first week in Peru -- Boone unquestioningly cleaned his plate of ceviche, a Peruvian dish consisting of raw fish, onions and red peppers.

Turns out, it was the fiery red peppers that set off the coup in Aaron's stomach.

It was the sight of his rounded belly that finally convinced his Peruvian missionary companion to get Aaron to a hospital.

Through his misery, Boone was aware of one nurse after another coming to stare at the stricken Norte Americano.

He kept hearing the word "gringo" followed by laughter.

So this is what it felt like to go someplace and feel you were making a difference in a meaningful way.

It was in Rio Seco that the father of a family of nine had a religious conversion as a result of Boone's efforts. The man thought it would set the right example for his children.

Eventually, the children followed suit. Since then, one of the man's sons has gone on a Mormon mission.

After the El Nino flood hit Rio Seco, thousands of people were homeless.

Taking emergency supplies sent by the United States, Boone and other volunteers helped build temporary homes to shield the homeless.

By the time his mission was over, Boone "felt like I was half-Peruvian, I loved it so much."

So this is what it feels like after thriving in a far-away land.

Suddenly, the world seems a small place.

One year after returning from Peru, Boone talked two buddies into taking a five-week, study-abroad trip to China. They walked on the Great Wall. Shuddered at the oppressive

atmosphere in Tiananmen Square.

Aaron fell in love with Shang-hai and added conversational Chinese to his language skills.

The next goal for the aspiring international businessman is the Philippines.

"There are so many places I want to go," Boone said.

Which is why, if they gave a Heisman Trophy for embracing life, Kentucky might well have the winner.