I just got back from a trip to Pisac, Peru, the site of Kusi Kawsay Elementary School, and thought I would share some of my impressions and photos with you.

Unlike so many charities we see, we’re not going to send you a photo of any single child, especially not with a tear running down his face. For one thing, our children are really happy in their new school, and there aren’t many tears around. OK, one little boy fell and skinned his knee, and he might have cried a little bit, but he was hugged, his knee was cleaned up, and before I could even get the camera out he had recovered. For some of these children, this is the first time their minds, their intellectual curiosity, has been treasured and nurtured. That makes almost anybody feel happy. For another thing, our students are too authentic as people to get all goofy for a photo op. Their cultural pride is too strong, there is no room for pity for these kids. There is no dying child to show you, because this is all about living, and learning to live you best, happy life. Living well, being proud of your heritage and your opportunities, and being hopeful for a great future is what our students, our school, is all about.

The actual buildings and the site are remarkable. They were designed by a local artist to incorporate the natural features of the mountain into the
design and function of the school. The views are unrivaled for their beauty. The stonework in the retaining walls and the stairways is beautifully and thoughtfully done, blending natural boulders that stay in place with the man-made additions necessary for the functionality of the school. The two sets of bathrooms, one for the kindergarten girls and boys, and the second for the elementary school girls and boys, are clean, modern and lovely. The bio digestor compost septic systems, selected for their ecological sensitivity, are installed and working well.

The new kindergarten building site is cleared (the first day I was at Kusi Kawsay, two men were chipping away with hammer and chisel at a large boulder that needed to be removed from the “footprint” of the kindergarten building….and the next day the boulder was a memory). The current kindergarten building will become the Administrative Building, which is required by Peruvian educational regulations. The site is also being prepared for the fifth and sixth grade classrooms. The amount of site preparation is extensive because of all of the natural stone, frequently very large boulders, that have to be cleared before creating level ground for the buildings. The removed stones are being used to form retaining walls, stairways and pathways on the school grounds.

The doors are not on the classrooms yet but are being made now that the wood is seasoned, and is the retractable wooden wall between classrooms # 3 and # 4. By having a removable wall, we have created the possibility of opening up the space for use in auditorium like school gatherings. The teachers all have their certifications, and they meet together twice a week for two hours for continuing education, organizational matters, and the exchange of ideas.

- Ann Beckham

Here’s are some of my photos from the trip:
As you walk up the pathway to climb the Mt. Pisac ruins, the entrance to the school is a wandering path on the left, with a welcoming gate.
Opening the gate, one is greeted by a stone circular stairway and two paths – the upper path leads to the kindergarten, the lower path leads to the elementary school houses area.
If you take the upper pathway to the right, you come to the kindergarten classroom and bathrooms. In the kindergarten, they bake bread every Wednesday.

The stairway and retaining wall system, when completed, forms the Andean symbol of a two-headed snake surrounding, protecting, the schoolhouses.
The stonework of the stairway incorporates the natural boulders left in place along its sides.

From the top of these stairs, a view of the four completed schoolhouses...
...To the right of the 4th schoolhouse, the area being cleared for the 5th schoolhouse is visible.

Just what the schoolhouses needed – kids playing at snack time!
Inside the classrooms, sunny and bright, with nice furnishings.