

The Last Days of Don Manuel

Don Manuel Quispe died December 11, 2004 at sunset, around 7:30 pm. He leaves behind his 2 sons, 1 daughter, and 12 grandchildren. He died at home in Chua Chua surrounded by his family and community. He was buried in ceremony by his family and many from the Q'ero community.

I had the gift of being with Don Manuel and his family the week before his death. I had been trying to return to the Q'ero many times over the past year. For so many reasons, I just could not seem to get there. His son would send messages through our office in Cuzco, to let me know that Don Manuel was calling out for me to visit him. In August I received a message from Karina, our Peruvian friend, that Don Manuel was asking for me rather strongly. Finally in December, I made the journey.

Jimmy "Starman" Doyle, myself, and our friend Berto began our journey. We were ready for any weather, since December is the rainy season. We had 7 ponies packed with supplies, including a 6 months supply of food to make sure Don Manuel would be all set for the rainy season. We also brought him new warm clothing and many gifts from the ayllu. Vanishing Cultures has continued support of Don Manuel and his family since its onset.

The journey was beautiful and very peaceful. The weather was warm, a bit cloudy with an occasional sprinkle. The mountain carried us up at an amazing speed. As I reached the last peak, seeing the village in the ravine beneath me, an amazing joy spread over me. I felt as if I was floating, leaving the others far behind.

Passing through the 3 foot high door into Don Manuel's rock cave house, I felt at home and an overwhelming sense of warmth came over me. I walked over to Don Manuel and embraced him. He was wiping his eyes in disbelief that I was truly there, and promptly yelled at me for taking so long. Then we cried and laughed as we hugged each other. I was very much reminded of the strong medicine man whom I had met with a beautiful toothless smile many years before. A while later, Jimmy and Berto entered. Don Manuel just smiled, again wiping his eyes in disbelief. Don Manuel remembered that Berto was the man who carried the 2 windows up and installed them in this 500 year old home, and Starman from their many meetings and travels in both Peru and the U.S. He was happy to see them both.

As I said in my previous note, installing the windows in Don Manuel's home made it the central meeting place for his family and the village. There was never a moment when Don Manuel was left alone. He had constant company, even folks just sitting with him in silence while he slept. He was involved in the family plans and also updated with the news and events of the Q'ero.

We took Don Manuel outside to sit and enjoy the warmth of the sun. We delivered the many gifts the ayllu had sent with us. We cleaned his house, changed his bed with fresh new blankets, changed his clothes, and filled his belly with good food and lots of laughter.

Don Manuel was in great spirits. He was truly happy and content with his life in the Q'ero. He was so proud of his family, especially his grandchildren. He would watch them and just laugh! We spent days listening to his stories, his journey's, his life as a young man and his wives. His children sang to us and shared more stories about Don Manuel's life, from their perspective. Sometimes he would get cranky with their version of the stories, and we all laughed. We enjoyed great food, great company and laughed until our sides hurt.

Don Manuel asked me why his students did not visit him. I explained about the difficulties getting to the Q'ero villages, especially the altitude. He made me promise to bring a group to see him after the rainy season. He said he could not remember many names, but knew all the faces in the photo's I had given him. We decided to plan a trip in May, to visit and work with him in Chua Chua. I told him he had to take care of himself, and that we would be back in May. I knew in my heart this would be the last time I would see him. Don Manuel, his son, and I made a plan of what we could do and how it would work. He reminded me he was not young and needed his rest also. I just laughed.

Don Manuel returned in spirit to his beloved Mountain right after I left. On Saturday morning I rose early to prepare for our return to Cuzco. I went in to talk with Don Manuel and hugged him. We spoke, and we cried. I put my hand on his heart, and he put his hand on my heart. He gave me a powerful life karpay. We talked a bit more about our families, he spent many weeks at my home and knew my family well. Then he gently drifted off to sleep. When our ponies were ready and the time came to leave, I placed his hand on back his heart and kissed him gently on the forehead. Later his son, Nasario, told us that Don Manuel never woke from his sleep. Don Manuel died the following Sunday as the sun set.

Don Manuel embraced me into his family and his tradition the first time I met him years ago. He was my father, my friend, my teacher, my protector. Don Manuel touched me in the deepest part of my soul. He was continuously pushing me to continue with this work. He has taught us all many things in many different ways. Even his death was in elegance. I will miss him forever.

Denise Kinch