

Bolivia Volunteers in Mission Team

June 19-July 4, 2009

Trip Report #3

Tuesday, June 30, 2009.

One of the most common expressions heard these days from members of the team is "I can't believe...". as in "...we're finished with Vacation Bible School" or "...we only have one more day of construction work", or "...it's almost time to go home." A lot of tears flowed last Friday when the VBS finished and the teachers had to say goodby to the children. While this sorrow was eased by the fact that some of the children were at the worship services at Piedra Viva and Nazarano Methodist on Sunday, it still was a sad time for both children and adults who had taken part in the VBS. It was indeed an exciting week, with many lessons learned and much fun enjoyed by the children and teachers alike.

The training workshops for women also wound down on Friday and were followed by a one-day seminar for married couples on Saturday. The two married couples on our team joined the seminar at the end of the session for "playtime" and crafts, to help all the couples to remember how to play together. To borrow a cliché, a good time was had by all.

At the construction site, things have gone very well. Rather than putting a finishing layer of concrete on the classroom floor and doing some plastering of wall as previously expected, we shifted focus to adding a layer of concrete to the roof of the structure to provide better protection from rain and, perhaps, providing a floor for a second-story classroom should the need for that come about. Plumbing for the new water tank was finished and several new fixtures were put in place in the bath. We painted the ceiling of the new counseling room in the medical area, after which several women from the congregation painted the wall. These women became so energized that they moved on to paint the walls of one of the old classrooms while we added a second coat in the counseling room. Meanwhile, the rest of the team moved on to a variety of other tasks such as repairing desks and chairs used by the daycare program and working on replacement of several broken windows. Monday was our last day at the construction site, and our host stated that they expected to have the new classroom ready for use in two weeks. (In fact, they already had signed up several people for a work detail on Saturday afternoon to move the process along.) While we worked we enjoyed seeing children who live nearby playing with simple things, like climbing on, and digging in, the pile of sand we were using in making concrete, building doll houses from rocks and scraps of wood and, during a work break, using as a jump rope the line on which buckets of sand were lifted up to the roof. There were many hugs and tears as we completed our task and got on the bus for the Instituto Americano.

Saturday also was a time for some shopping.. We did not shop at La Cancha, the traditional open-area market, because of an increase in crime in that area, but found many Bolivian items in a nearby more-secure mall. While there, we were surprised to find that Evo Morales, the President of Bolivia, was making a speech at a nearby plaza as part of an event in which England gave two modern firetrucks and related equipment to the City of Cochabamba and Venezuela presented some motorcycles for use by the police. Several team members went to hear the speech, and found space on a platform very close to the front of the crowd. Later that day, most of the team patronized the retail outlet of Fotrama (a large co-operative of women who hand knit clothing and other articles from alpaca wool) acquiring items that will keep us warm when winter comes at home. That evening we enjoyed gathering at the home of Wilson and Nora Boots, our local coordinators for VIM Teams, for pizza, fellowship and spectacular views of the city at night.

Sunday we worshiped in the small but very beautiful Nazarano sanctuary (resurrected by the congregation two years ago from the seriously deteriorated condition into which it had fallen until new leadership and new members revitalized the congregation). This was followed by a barbecue lunch arranged by the team and attended by about 100 members of the Nazareno congregation, and then a party arranged by the congregation to celebrate what had been accomplished the previous week and to wish us well on our travel home at the end of the coming week. Many songs were sung, prayers were said and hugs were exchanged throughout the day.

Tuesday was our day to visit the mountain village of Sajpaya, the second village enrolled in the FEPADE program the Bolivia Mission supports that, for a contribution of \$500, provides materials for replacement of a traditional home—usually having a thatched roof, adobe walls, a dirt floor and often no door—with a similar modest home having a metal roof, plastered walls, a concrete floor and a door. These new homes prevent the nightly invasion in the traditional homes of a beetle that bites sleeping residents and inject a parasite that causes Chagas disease, a debilitating and deadly ailment for which there is no cure. Although over 80% of adults in these communities have this disease, the construction of the new dwellings protects future generations and gives residents hope for the future of their families. We were happy to learn that the last 15 of a total of 53 replacement homes had been completed during the past year, making Sajpaya the fourth village to be completed since the Bolivia Mission began its financial support of this program in 2002. The final house was officially opened during our visit with a ribbon-cutting ceremony (with our Team Leaders cutting the ribbons). An additional benefit of the program is that it leads the community to work together and this cooperation brings future cooperation on other projects beyond house replacement, such as installation of water and sanitary systems. For the people of Sajpaya, the next step was building retaining walls along the neighboring river so that valuable cropland could be protected from seasonal flooding. We were particularly happy to have a chance to see the retaining walls built after the 2008 VIM Team visited, construction that was funded in part by a grant from Bishop Park of the New York Conference out of his Partners in Mission fund. We also saw the first 26 100-lb bags of potatoes raised on this land that were ready for sale at the market in the city nearby. We were informed that 1.5 hectares (about 3.7 acres) of land has been “rescued” through this program so far and that they plan to build additional walls to save a similar amount of cropland. They currently are working on financing for this as well as for construction of a road that will expedite their shipments of produce to town.

After leaving Sajpaya, we traveled to another rural area that has been officially declared the poorest section of Bolivia. We visited there with a group of 36 families who currently live higher in the mountains in an area that is more than three hours from the school their children can attend and also is rife with Chagas disease. To overcome these two problems for the benefit of their children, and enable them to grow more and better crops, they are in the process of placing a legal claim of an area of abandoned land near the river and the larger town, and will be working with FEPADE on the building of houses. Given that this will be a new village, not replacement of existing housing, we suggested they also contact the the Bolivian Habitat for Humanity organization in Cochabamba to discuss the possibility of further support.

This is the last trip report for the 2009 team, as we will not have access to email after Wednesday morning, when we will be leaving the Instituto Americano for a hotel outside of Cochabamba to engage in several activities designed to educate us further in the culture and history of this beautiful country and its beautiful people. These will include visits to a small Bolivian-natural-history museum, a nearby historic home and one of the oldest villages established during the colonial period, as well as education on the foods a Bolivia with some hands-on preparation (and consumption) of typical Bolivian dishes. On Friday we depart for Santa Cruz and on to Miami and the La Guardia, where we arrive about midday. While sad to leave this place and the people here we have grown to love, we are excited to return home. (Our arrival back in the U.S. will be on July 4, and we are pleased to note that the whole country will be welcoming us back with fireworks and other signs of celebration.) As always, the Bolivia VIM team will be returning CHANGED FOREVER.

Paz y gracia (peace and grace) to all, and please do ask us how we spent our summer vacations.

YOUR BOLIVIA VIM TEAM