

A Mission, an Education

Second in a series

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Inside the walls of the Hotel Diplomat in Cochabamba, Bolivia, one can find all the comforts of home.

A variety of great food, well prepared. Safety and security. A friendly, helpful staff. A beautiful view of the surrounding countryside. A business center with computers, printers and the Internet, a link to the rest of the world.

Outside of the hotel's walls, however, is a very different world.

The streets of Cochabamba, like the streets of any big city, are full of color, life and activity. It is, after all, one of the three biggest cities in Bolivia. It is a center not only for business, but for education, sports, the arts and government.

But at times, its streets can be cruel.

Pickpockets are common. A taxi driver, knowing his passengers are "gringos" from the United States, doubles or even triples his standard fee. Foreigners are warned not to walk the streets, even in groups, after dark.

The streets can be unkind even for those who have always called Cochabamba home.

Some children, as young as five or six, are turned out of their family home and left to fend for themselves. It may be because the father drinks heavily, then physically or sexually abuses the child. Sometimes, it's because the family has too many mouths to feed, and looks to lighten its burden. In other cases, it's because the child takes up sniffing glue, becoming addicted to its high.

That is where the Amanecer Foundation comes in.

Dr. David Crane, a Chippewa Falls dentist, has partnered with the Amanecer Foundation for the past 19 years in organizing a humanitarian and educational program to Cochabamba, Bolivia. Amanecer was founded in 1981 by a group of Catholic nuns, the Daughters of Charity, to serve abandoned and mistreated boys, girls, women and babies living on the streets of Cochabamba.

Amanecer operates 12 facilities in Cochabamba, providing shelter, education and vocational training to hundreds of boys and girls. The Bolivian government recognizes Amanecer as a non-profit organization, and has entered into a contract with it to provide

relief services. However, most of Amanecer's funding comes from individuals, religious communities and international foundations. And volunteers from throughout the world contribute time and expertise in helping Amanecer achieve its goals.

After a 12 hour flight from Miami, our group of 30 checked into the Hotel Diplomat, unpacking and freshening up. We then met in the second floor dining room for what would be the first of many daily briefings.

The briefings served two purposes: First, we ate breakfast and socialized. About half of us were taking part in the mission for the first time; the other half had been here before. Old friendships were renewed, and new ones kindled during these meals.

The second purpose was to talk about our mission, its goals, the opportunities to work or to learn, and that day's schedule. Topics might include anything from the availability of yellow fever shots from a public health nurse, to when the chartered bus was leaving to drop people off at various clinics around the city.

Led by Dr. Crane and Dr. Sherwin Shinn, the briefings are informative, educational, and always humorous.

Dr. Crane says the goal of the mission is not to examine say, 500 children in the eight days. It is to learn the culture, enjoy, and do meaningful things, regardless of the count.

We go around the table and introduce ourselves, telling where we're from, what our specialty is. There are dentists, hygienists, educators, college students, an artist, volunteers, a journalist, and a retired teacher. We're told what to expect when we go to the various "houses" run by Amanecer. Little children at Salomon Kline may cling to your leg, thinking you are there to adopt them. Those at Madre de Dios, a shelter for abused women and children, may be shy and withdrawn given what they've experienced. Some children will try to get in every picture you take.

We meet Dr. Sherwin Shinn, a dentist from Sammamish, Washington, who with his wife, Jerri, first came on this mission 16 years ago. They immediately fell in love with its work, said Dr. Shinn, because it provided them an outlet to care about the children of Cochabamba, the "little love sponges" who will absorb all one can give.

"And no matter how much you give, you have more to give," Dr. Shinn told the group. "You can open your heart wide and the love is never ending."

The Shinn's founded "Smile Power," an effort to connect young people in the U.S. with those of Cochabamba. They wanted to American children to know that the children of Bolivia are not heathens, but are "just like the kids back home."

At the first briefing, Dr. Shinn introduces Alphonso, a 15-year-old former street child who is one of the program's success stories. When he and his wife met Alphonso in one of the Dr. Crane's dental clinics 10 years ago, the little boy was permanently bent over at

the waste. Alphonso suffered a debilitating disease, tuberculosis of the spine, which collapsed his spine, prevented him from standing up straight.

Dr. and Jerri Shinn rallied grade school students back in Washington State to help Alphonso. Before long, they'd raised enough interest and money to send him to the U.S. for surgery. It took a year for him to recuperate, but now Alphonso is back in Cochabamba, living and helping at Amanecer's Casa de Nazareth, and studying to be an expert in bilingual education.

Dr. Shinn admitted that prior to his work with Dr. Crane's program, he was "stingy" when it came to his emotional life.

"But the kids opened me up and taught me a great lesson about life," he said. "Each of you will fall in love with something down here. Go for it! You can make a huge difference in people's lives."