

Bolivian Offers Love, Understanding With Dental Care

Fifth in a series

By Mark Baker
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Vani Salazar Morato has been a dentist for six years. For the past two years, she's juggled work in her private practice with providing care at Madre de Dios in Cochabamba.

Madre de Dios houses is a shelter for abused women and abandoned children, operated by the Amanecer Foundation. It works closely with Dr. David Crane, a dentist from Chippewa Falls, who has been leading humanitarian missions to Bolivia for 19 years.

Salazar came to work at the shelter because she wanted to give back.

"I have a friend who was working here and she let me know about this program," said Salazar. "Actually, since I was studying to be a dentist, I wanted to do social work. So for me it was the perfect time to start, because I have my own private practice."

She works Monday through Friday mornings at the shelter, and at her private practice in the afternoons.

"So you can see both worlds," she said.

As we visited, a young girl sat quietly outside the dental office. Rocio M., a 10-year-old, is waiting to be seen by the American dental workers. Rocio grew up in the Chapare, or jungle, four hours to the east of Cochabamba.

Why is Rocio at the shelter?

"Her mother bring her to the city so she will be in a place that she has never saw," explained Dr. Salazar.

The mother led the girl through the streets of Cochabamba, until the girl said she had to go to the bathroom. Her mother told her to use one on a nearby bus, because buses in the big city had restrooms.

The girl climbed up the steps of the bus, and looked all around, but could not find the bathroom. When she got off the bus a few moments later, her mother had disappeared.

Rocio instantly became one of the abandoned children in the streets of Cochabamba who is now being cared for by the Amanecer program.

"She is one of my favorites," said Dr. Salazar.

Unfortunately, Rocio is not alone.

“We have a kid here who doesn’t know how old he is, but looking at his teeth, he’s about five years,” said Dr. Salazar. “And he just eat bread all his life. Nothing more than bread. When he saw the food here the first time, he said, ‘What is this? I don’t want to eat it. I just want to eat bread.’”

“He was living with his father; he loves his father. He told me yesterday, once his daddy bring him gum. And it was the most beautiful present for him. That’s the only other thing that he knows other than bread.”

Dr. Salazar says the treatment she provides is often more than dental related. It goes to helping the women and children heal the hurt inside as well.

“When you know about the history of the kids, to do a dental (checkup) is just a small thing to do for them. They need so much help because they are hurt in their hearts. They are like sad kids, and when they come here, I try to give them a nice moment.”

Dr. Salazar says she always gives her patients a little present for their courage. When they are sad or not feeling well, “I let them help me with the next treatment and they like that. They feel important.”

During her time in the United States, she picked up an idea that she wants to do in Cochabamba to raise money for dental equipment and medication. She wants to have the children from the shelter draw pictures about their trips to the dentist office. She hopes to pick the best 12, and make a calendar to sell.

“That is our project for this year.”

The shelter’s clinic participates in the Smiles Forever program. It trains young indigenous people to be dental assistants. The two-year program already has its first graduate. The young woman is working in private practice, said Dr. Salazar.

“They are very proud of what they did. They have an opportunity for their life. If not (for Smiles Forever), they would probably work as a maid cleaning houses and never study.”

Currently, six girls are in the program, three in the morning and three in the afternoon.

On the day of our visit to Madre de Dios, the three girls who train during the morning shift kept busy helping Dr. Michelle Espinoza and dental hygienist Shari Vandehaar. Both women marveled at how the three girls kept busy the entire time, not taking a break, and always anticipating what was needed next.