

## **Joy, Love, Hope Permeate Facilities for Abandoned Children**

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One might imagine that visiting homes for abandoned children in a foreign country is a depressing prospect.

That assumption, however, is way off base.

Our visit to Bolivia as part of Dr. David Crane's 19<sup>th</sup> annual humanitarian and educational mission to Cochabamba found just the opposite.

At every Amanecer Foundation facility in this city of 500,000, we found joy, happiness, love and hope.

We found well fed and relatively content women and children.

Buildings and grounds were neat and clean, even though some were 100 years old.

We found staff and volunteers who were patient and kind.

We found children who, despite being unwanted by parents, were in an environment where they were secure.

We found a program that placed a high value on providing fundamentals, from work experience, to training in technical school, to education.

Some of the children come to Amanecer facilities for a short period of time. Others spend years there, through high school.

Sister Mary Therese terms Amanecer a "Noah's Ark," containing a little bit of everything. It cares for babies given up for at birth. It entices young boys to come off the streets and into one of its houses. It opens its doors for older people who are dying, and have no place to go.

The goal is to "bathe the person who walks into our home with love," said Sister Mary Therese, noting the example given by the Good Samaritan in the New Testament. "We work with the human person, and we work with the Divine."

Our group of volunteers witnessed this first hand as we tour five Amanecer facilities prior to opening the dental clinics.

At Madre de Dios, a facility for abused women and children, we discover a middle age woman sitting in a wheelchair in the bright sunshine of the courtyard. She recently lost a leg to cancer, and had no place to live. Amanecer took her in.

At the house called Yaykuna, staff members work with boys who would otherwise be out on the street. Upstairs on the second floor, a female staff person works with four boys on reading and homework. On the main floor, another handful of boys are drawing nature scenes on cards that will be sold to raise money. While some boys play foosball on an old table – using a large steel ball bearing for a foosball – another boy grinds tomatoes for supper using two pieces of stone.

At a third shelter, Sayarikuy, the boys are older and noticeably tougher. Most have been hardened by street life. They already have an edge found in many teenagers, ready to test the limits.

When we arrive at San Martin/San Vicente, the boy at the gate refuses at first to let us in. Like all Amanecer facilities, this one is surrounded by a six foot tall brick fence, and a metal gate. He looks through an opening at us, but he doesn't unlock it until he gets approval from Sister Francine.

At San Martin, the boys are older but more focused. Sister Francine tells us they must cooperate with the rules of the house if they want to stay. They must continue their formal academic education, and must begin to work in a formal trade – agriculture, baking, metal work or carpentry. A tour of the grounds shows the boys raise livestock and tend gardens. They must help prepare their food, and each boy washes his own clothes.

The metal shop is busy the day we visit, with boys putting together beds that will be sold in market. The goal is to teach the boys a vocation so when they leave, they are good enough to get – and keep – a job in the outside world, said Sister Francine. Older boys are expected to set the example for younger boys.

Another important goal of San Martin, said Sister Francine, is to keep the boys intertwined with their roots. Lots of boys have been treated poorly – physically and verbally abused – at home. Some took to the streets to avoid the abuse; some turned to glue sniffing or drugs as an escape. Amanecer provides them with a clean and safe home, showing them what they have missed out on. By providing them technical skills, it's expected that the boys can return to society, yet turn away from the destructive behavior that got them here in the first place.

The staff also provides for the boys' spiritual needs, "so they'll know they're loved by God and by us," says sister. "When they realize there is someone who cares for them and believes in them, they begin to believe in themselves."

The boys maintain contact with their families in hopes of reconciliation and eventual reunification. The families know how the boys are progressing at every step of the way.

"A big part of their identity – who am I? – is the family," agrees Sister Carol. "If they grow up hating their families, there's a part of them that is not going to heal."

The majority of boys leave this home with much stability and confidence, said Sister Francine. While some relapse, the majority do very well.

Our final stop of the day is at Solomon Klein. It cares for the youngest of children in Cochabamba. About 30 percent are orphaned, the other 70 percent were abandoned by their parents.

Once through the gate, we observe spit-polished clean buildings and grounds. In one room, staff is caring for a dozen children too small to crawl. Another room contains 10 tiny cribs, empty at the moment. We walk through the commons area toward the back yard. Before we can get far, however, a river of two-foot high children comes pouring in. Instantly, they take to one adult, often crying out “Papi” while they cling to your leg.

We go outside into a play area, where there are swings, a slide, a merry-go-round and other playground equipment. The children don’t know whether to climb on the jungle gym or grab onto an adult’s hands, so many do both, grabbing the hand and leading the adult visitor to their favorite area.

A little boy attaches himself to Sandy Gill, a dental hygienist from Calgary, British Columbia, and doesn’t let go for a half hour. A little girl in a striped shirt does the same to Dr. Dan DeFazio, a dentist from Albuquerque. He easily lifts her small frame and she settles onto his hip as he carries her around.

Sheri Vandelaar, a dental hygienist from Chippewa Falls, finds herself working the teeter-totter with a little boy dressed in blue and sporting a big smile. Prof. Bob Sutton of the UW-Eau Claire catches a little girl as she zooms down the slide.

Sarah Williams, a dental hygienist from LaCrosse, tests the knowledge of one boy with math cards. He gets a surprising number of the flashcards right. Pre-dental students Joe Kaminski and Karin Mathiesen of UW Eau Claire, and Katie Gorton of Seattle, are like magnets, drawing little ones as easy as a mop attracts dust.

At each of the facilities we visited, Amanecer has a room set up with one or two dental chairs. The equipment is in various stages of repair; some of it is surprisingly good, while in others, not even the basic equipment works. One member of our entourage is a fix-it specialist. He’ll spend the entire week trying to get everything to work properly.

After meeting the children they’ll be working with, the dentists, hygienists, assistants and volunteers gain a deeper understanding of the need – and the purpose – of this mission. It is to give of oneself unselfishly so that these children, who have so little and have lost so much, can have faith that the world really does care for them.