

Feliz Carnaval!

This past Saturday, Feb. 13, marked the beginning of Carnaval. Every year on the Saturday before Ash Wednesday the mining town of Oruro becomes alive, celebrating the Carnavales de Oruro, one of the largest Carnaval celebrations in South America. I was fortunate to travel to Oruro to witness the festivities, the endless procession of traditional dances, the beautiful costumes and the marvelous chaos of the celebration.

Oruro, situated southeast of the capital city, La Paz, became famous as a mining town, although there are no longer any working mines. Now, the city is a major railway junction and commercial center for the mining communities of the altiplano. The dances of Carnaval depict the history of the town and country, as well as demonstrate Bolivian traditions and culture. The procession in Oruro followed a 5km route through the city ending in the Plaza Principal. One of the most popular dances is the Diablada ceremony in homage to the Virgen del Socavon, patroness of miners, and in gratitude to Pachamama, the Earth Mother. The Diablada was traditionally performed by indigenous miners. At the entrance of every mine is a statue of the Diablo, called Tio, who watches over the mine and its workers. The miners would offer cocoa leaves, among other valuables, in hopes that the Tio would keep them safe in the mine.

The parades and festivities continue all weekend in Oruro, ending with the ch'alla rituals to invoke ancestors, unite with Pachamama and bless personal possessions. This day is also the dia del agua, an all-out water fight on the streets of the country. Children and adolescents have been preparing for this day for weeks, launching water balloons and spraying foam at passer-bys in the street. I can rarely walk through the streets without returning home sopping wet. The water war was in full swing during the processions in Oruro. The crowds would dance, sing, drink and cheer as the dancers perform. The moment the group finished dancing and moved on, water fights broke out in the stands until the next group of performers arrived.

Carnaval was an incredible display of the passion and pride of the Bolivian people.

School

I am continuing to enjoy working with the Kindergarten children at school. My class size has doubled, which has brought about new challenges; challenges due to lack of space and classroom management. The children love learning through art, music and books, but if I turn my head for a split second, one or two will escape to the playground. The students made beautiful masks for a small Carnaval parade last Friday. They performed traditional Bolivian dances outside with the other grades. Dancing, especially folkloric dancing is an important part of the Bolivian tradition and identity. Children learn at a young age the dances of the country and at school they participate in dance lessons to develop these skills.

I continue to take a group of secondary students to La Casa every week. La Casa is a home for seniors. It is a challenge for the students to interact with the elderly. They are intimidated and do not know how to strike up a conversation. We have begun to work on ways to begin conversations, conversation topics, items that will help stimulate a discussion, such as bringing newspapers, guitars, art activities. It is interesting to observe the students as they make progress engaging themselves in conversations and developing relationships with the individuals at La Casa.

Outside of School

Outside of school I continue to be involved in many activities. I was fortunate to visit various NGO organizations in the city. One, called Amanecer (Sunrise), was founded to serve abandoned and mistreated boys, girls, women and babies, living on the streets of Cochabamba. Amanecer operates 12 facilities around the city that provide shelter, motivation, prevention and rehabilitation, education, vocational training and day care services to those in need. I visited two of the Amanecer houses: Casa Nazareth for boys ages 5-12 and Solomon Klein a home for 150 children between birth and seven years of age. The children at Solomon Klein were finishing a snack of juicy watermelon when we arrived. They latched to us like leeches for lack of human contact. I had children holding on to every available limb. I was immediately pulled to the playground where I spent my time catching child after child as they jumped from the monkey bars to the ground. It was an overwhelming experience to see 150 abandoned children so desperate for human contact and love.

Another organization I visited is called Movimiento Sonrisa (Movement Smile). Movimiento Sonrisa works to support the patients of the Viedma Hospital in Cochabamba. The organization provides emotional and pedagogical support to the children and occupational therapy to the adult patients, as well as fundraising activities to cover the cost of medical treatment for patients who can not afford it. A small shelter has been constructed in the hospital for parents who need a place to stay while their children and receiving medical treatment. The shelter offers housing, three meals a day and educational workshops to the family members of the highest-need patients. I spent the afternoon visiting the different wards in the hospital and meeting the children who are under the care of Movimiento Sonrisa. One boy, Andres, was hit by a car several years ago. He suffered injuries to his jaw. During the hospital treatment, he developed an infection that spread to his brain, paralyzing his body. Andres has been in the hospital for years, abandoned by his parents. His progress has been stunning. He has recuperated the ability to walk and control his limbs. He is unable to talk, but communicates with sounds, body language and facial expressions. He lives at the hospital and is evidence of the great work being done by Movimiento Sonrisa.

In my spare time I have started to take guitar lessons. I would like to learn to play some the traditional Bolivian music.

I also work with Elena, reading and writing, a couple nights a week. She has improved drastically and is able to read short stories and sound out words to write. It has been very exciting watching her progress.

I continue to enjoy the challenges and excitement that I encounter in each experience in Bolivia. It continues to be a wonderful adventure, filled with never-ending learning.

Thank you for your support, generosity and kindness throughout the year.