

Alyssa Dammann
Bolivia, ETW
Summer 2011

On my way to Bolivia at the end of May, I really had no idea of what to expect. When I landed in the La Paz airport, I felt so nervous, not knowing what was ahead of me. I had just landed alone in the poorest country in South America, and I was far from being fluent in Spanish. After feeling lost for the first couple of days, I adjusted to the new culture, and, like most other people, had an experience I would not trade for anything.

While in Bolivia, I worked in a center for kids with disabilities. Before getting there, I knew nothing more about what I would be doing or what the center was like. When I arrived on my first day, I was surprised at how similar it was to other centers in the United States. They had the same goal of societal integration for the 130 children who came to the center and were working towards that goal through similar teaching methods, just with less technology and fewer resources. This was surprising to me because Bolivia's integration of the disabled is much more advanced than many other countries, even those more developed than it. I saw a man with cerebral palsy working in the local Burger King, an idea that became accepted only recently in the US. When I asked my host mom about it, she said it was very common and they were given the same benefits as any other worker. Considering how far behind Bolivia is in its politics and economy, the people are certainly accepting of citizens with disabilities, a social reform that normally takes years and years in developed countries. The United States did not pass its Americans with Disabilities Act until 1990, but comparatively Bolivia is strides ahead of us—not necessarily with specific laws requiring fair treatment, but certainly with its practice of fair treatment of the disabled.

When I first went to Ceoli, I was expecting to be greeted by poor children I would feel sorry for. However, this was certainly not the case. The kids were all so happy, and while they were a little wary of me at first for being an *extraña*, they warmed up to me quickly and were so loving and accepting. Most of the children were orphans because their parents simply cannot afford to take care of them and did not have any other resources to turn to for help. Most wore the same clothes day after day and did not have a single possession of their own, but this certainly did not matter to them. One of my favorites, Leo, was an orphan and owned only one outfit. However, whenever I saw him, he had the biggest smile on his face as he ran to me with his arms straight up in the air, waiting to get picked up. The personalities of the children were no different than those I have worked with in the US. The summer working with the children made me feel confident in my decision to become a physical therapist to work with kids with disabilities. Even with the language barrier, I was able to connect with each of the children, and each one was able to make me smile and thank God that I was able to have the opportunity to come to Bolivia and meet them.

The other aspect I truly loved about Bolivia was meeting all of the people. I lived in a city, Cochabamba, so I had the chance to meet all kinds of people—my taxi drivers, waitresses in restaurants, owners of stores, and especially my host family. I really stood out in Cochabamba, so many people would approach me and want to know why I was there and what I was doing. Once they found out that I was volunteering and really loved Bolivia, I would be caught into a conversation that would be at least ten minutes long. They were all so curious about my life in America and they loved telling me about their country, whether it was the weather, education system, or politics. Most of what I learned about Bolivia as a country I learned from these discussions with other people. Another valuable aspect of these conversations was having the

chance to speak Spanish, which I really loved. At first, I was embarrassed about using it, but everyone I talked to was so helpful by providing me with words and speaking slowly for me. I especially loved talking to my taxi driver who took me to work every day as well as my family. My taxi driver did not know much about the United States, so I would tell him about our cities, weather, and culture, and he taught me about Cochabamba, *fútbol*, and the Copa América. My family had several gatherings that I was invited to, which really helped introduce me to their lifestyle, which was that of a typical Latin American family. The entire family would come over, and everyone would be laughing and shouting across the room, talking about personal issues that would be considered private in America. I had told my host mom I could not find tennis shoes anywhere that were big enough for me, so at one gathering, she asked every relative in sight where I could find shoes for my comparatively big feet—they would gasp, stare at my feet, and struggle to think of a place where I could find some before finally suggesting a men's store.

I was also fortunate enough to have the chance to travel throughout Bolivia. I loved talking to the people from all parts of Bolivia, to learn about their area that they were so proud of. I came to know the parts of Bolivia like the States—the weather based off elevations, the different accents, and people stereotypes of each area. On my travels I met people from all over the world, and I loved how our second language of Spanish was able to unite all of us. I also had the opportunity to travel to Perú, and it is no secret that Peruvians and Bolivians do not get along. I found myself defending Bolivia when the Peruvians would scoff at my summer experience. The people of Bolivia had made me feel like I was truly part of their country, which is something I am so grateful for. My summer would have had a much more detached, impersonal feeling to it had I not felt truly welcomed in this country that was so different from my own.