

# VOLUNTEER EXPERIENCES

## BY WAY OF PRESENTATION

Since its foundation, the International Association for Volunteer Work endeavours to offer to all volunteers such tools that may help them to improve their work, and to reinforce, whenever necessary, the belief that it is worthwhile to live for the others, even if it is only a part time activity.

The present collection of note-books was started, and is being pursued, for this purpose; ideally it would cover any subject that should be available to the Volunteer as he or she might require them.

With the same purpose we are offering here a number of experiences of different types and different personal approaches, so that those of us who are acting in the field of direct attention to other people, may feel the company and support of people who are already experiencing the inner gratification of helping others without expecting any compensation.

This inner gratification is indeed the highest reward for the Volunteer, whose job has to be carried out without expecting even the gratitude of those who benefit from it.

## CITIZENS INITIATIVE CONVIVE

Being a volunteer has helped me to survive, to regain my identity, to feel myself again useful, and with the self-respect needed to understand that my problems and misadventures were nothing but a drop in the ocean, compared to the suffering of so many human beings, whose life is anything but a pleasant path.

I am a Chilean, and at the time when my country went through extremely difficult conditions, which forced me to leave it –with my heart and dreams broken- I found in volunteer work the strength to stand and continue forward, cooperating towards a more human, more fair, better world.

My experience from my country of birth proved very useful in the countries where I took refuge, and I could bring some help in Argentina and Ecuador in years when the term “volunteer” was not widely known.

Now, however, I have collected a sizeable baggage of experiences, some of them very good, even marvellous, and others that, while not so good, were nonetheless quite enriching. It should be understood that we can draw valuable lessons even from unfavourable situations.

Helping to bear a child in a cane hut, with a wash-basin and a candle light as only tools, or to assist the victims of an earthquake, have been the most satisfactory experiences I have been through: I got from them much more than I could give, because the first cry of the baby I helped to be born, or the smile of the little old lady whose grandchild we could find in the chaos of the earthquake, cannot be compared to anything. This is my most valued treasure.

Now I live in Spain for already three years, cooperating as a volunteer in different organisations, bringing a word of encouragement or some information to so many fellow immigrants who, like myself, have left back the own country, the own friends and life.

These days I am a volunteer in the Citizens Initiative "CONVIVE" (Living Together), a NGO that is quite new, but has very clear views on the meaning of terrorism, intolerance, homophobia or whatever goes against human dignity. I feel identified with my fellow volunteers, and very pleased to join my experience to their potential.

We are endeavouring to carry our project to its destination, and even if at this moment our resources are quite scarce, we have a very significant strength: our joint effort as volunteers working truly, honestly and with transparency towards a better society.

I think that in this global and materialistic world, where wars are not waged to defend one's land or identity –as frequently pretended in public speeches- but to destroy a country and rob it from what the great powers covet, to be a volunteer sustains your faith in a better tomorrow.

Julia Cádiz Espinosa  
Citizens Initiative CONVIVE

## MY FRIENDS IN PRISON

Yes indeed, marginal people are my friends, but now those of them with whom I am more in contact –and more to their service- are prison inmates.

Since three years I go as a volunteer to the Model and the Wad Ras prisons in Barcelona, to give lessons on basic education.

I am very grateful to the religious Order of the Mercy, because it has provided me the opportunity to enter into relation with the field of imprisonment, from which I have learned so much: it has been for me a school of life, in which I have learned many basic lessons.



I have learned how many and how painful and unpleasant stories there were behind that people! I have also learned that when you are inside you love them, and you become so involved that you do a lot of things for them. Someone has said that the volunteer has to be a bridge between the prison and society; I would add between the prison and any Parish that may have a prisoner in its area, and furthermore between the prisoner and his or her family, whenever this is possible.

When I started to go to the Model Prison, a young prisoner asked me around Christmas: "Are there holiday lighting in the streets"? That question left me a deep impression! It also showed the longing for outside life that afflicts the prisoner. Around the same time (when I was a "novice") a convict over fifty years old went crying like a child and said: "Miss, I don't want to stay here. I was so happy at home with my wife, my son and my daughter-in-law!" Thanks heaven I was not drawn by my emotion, but summing up my courage I told him: "No, please! What may your wife say when she learns this?". And he replied: "I'll get a laugh". I was also very impressed by this situation and by his reply! Some women in Wad-Ras used to tell me referring to the Model prison: "My husband -or my friend- is there". Then I endeavoured to talk with the men, and they were all very grateful.

As a last comment, I wish you to know that, as a believer, I feel very comforted by the engagement I took on my retirement from formal teaching and also by being, like Jesus, a friend of marginal people, bringing them relief, peace and hope.

Mercè Laguía Busque  
Order of the Mercy

## **I WOULD REGRET NOT TO BE INVOLVED**

I would regret to go through life without being involved, without endeavouring to change the environment, without being in politics -the politics in favour of people- and without promoting critical conscience. When I joined “Engineering Without Frontiers” I was reluctant to take part in trips with a solidarity purpose; the impulse that should lead you to a NGO is not to travel, but to cooperate. I organised the lock-in against the Iraq war, and I attended two European social forums. Now I am going to Peru for two months with a NGO dealing with technology for human development. My university courses will suffer from it, but without this experience you may as well throw away your diploma.

Jaume Descòs, student  
Volunteer in “Engineering Without Frontiers”

## **AT THE OTHER END OF THE LINE**

My service consists in approaching anyone who calls telephone 93.414.48.48 in Barcelona, asking for attention. I am the *line* of the Telephone of Hope

It consists in listening anyone who needs to open the stream of his or her heart; welcoming whoever is anxious to be understood on his personal or family problems, on difficult relations of any kind. Sometimes it has to do with sickness, allegedly misinterpreted or improperly cared for, or, more frequently with limit situations of despair and closed horizons.

It is like devoting oneself to pay warm attention to the anxieties of people in grief, sickness or left aside, that today's society cannot recognise or approach properly. Frequently not even the own family is capable of facing this type of situations, because of dispersed feelings or lack of affection, which further depress its victims. The feeling of solitude contributes to sink the spirit still deeper, to the point that often they cannot even express their problems. Being overwhelmed by them, they feel further pressure to shout their own truth, that they do exist, that they are suffering injustice, that they feel impotent and alone.

Through the telephone line, my voice endeavours to sound friendly, affectionate, to offer faith and hope for better prospects. In exchange I feel myself enriched by the trust shown by the man or woman who is calling, which confers to me a new strength. I learn first hand the realities of life around us, which is often ignored. The truth about the social evils that shamefully conceal themselves in some quarters, or areas, or families, and in the spirit of young and old unfortunated people.

Learning to listen: a great subject still pending. But with a few years practice, I now feel the joy of exercising it.

Concepció  
FOUNDATION “HELP AND HOPE”

## **LIFE IS MORE THAN HIDING IN A COUNTRY IN THE NORTH**

Galicia and the “chapapote” (oil tide) were my initiation. The Town Council of Masnou covered the rental of a van to go there, and on our return we installed an exhibition and gave a number of talks. We joined a diversity of movements, such as Catalan Network for the Cancellation of External Debt, Stop the War, Preventive Boycott, and Social Advice.

I learned a lot. The more information you get, the more nervous you get. “The subtle power of transnational companies” by Antoni Verger, was a decisive book.



Two years ago I became independent, I left professional waterpolo and I was free from its eight hours daily of training. I went to Nicaragua, where my brother had opened a school with Physicists for Development in the worst area of Managua. Life in the huts there may be hair raising. I felt I had been an egoist for having devoted myself to the insignificance of waterpolo, fortunate for being born here and having felt the urge to change many things. Bu how to do it? Financing a family does not solve the basic problem. Life is something more than pushing a ball, buying a car, working in a multinational, and hiding in the North. I have never been interested in politics, but we have to admit that it presides everything, and it is necessary to correct its course by social action. "If we were to distribute all the money, we would all live as in Portugal", said Arcadi Oliveras in a talk he gave in Atzavara, our organization in Masnou. “We could be engineers, electronic technicians, manufacturers..., and at the same time we could be ignorant as regards knowledge of the Third World”.

Carles Llistar  
Studying a Master Course in Ecological Agriculture.  
LV. 21-6-04

## **THE WORLD IS SMALL, DIVERSITY MAKES IT LARGER**

Luis Alberto is a young peruvian who came to Spain two years ago planning to be a volunteer. He happened to meet Arantza and the other volunteers of ADSIS in Zaragoza. He now tells us his experience.

"To be a volunteer". Two words imagined and coveted through thousands of kilometres, time lags, different accents. The idea had been latent in my head day after day; the sudden opportunity for the trip appeared that cold week in June 2002. For the first time in my life I saw myself as an emigrant: another continent, common roots, a shared culture, a new experience facing me.

Zaragoza, the university, an information table of ADSIS, a yellow pamphlet asking "give a hand", my fingerprint on fresh paint, a few minutes listening... I had found where to convert that wish into reality, I only needed to go for it.

Arantza. We talked over the telephone and we agreed to meet, to know each other, and discuss the meaning of volunteering. The conversation ended in a view of broad projects and the courage to face them, and more than anything the essence of the only word that I can write in several languages: interculturality.

We agreed on many things to do. Because of my experience in law I explained my interest in offering legal counsel to emigrants, with or without papers, preferently the latter, who are unfortunately a large majority, and numbers in statistics that are growing not only on paper, but on small boats, in the labour exploitation of a green house, or in the cruel nights soliciting along a road.

The idea went maturing through encounters with people who shared the same idea: to form a group of young people of different cultures, nationalities, etc., in order to promote coexistence and integration of all within society.



With Arantza and the other volunteers we looked for telephone numbers, addresses, etc., of associations of foreigners and organisations related to the intercultural field. We prepared posters, pamphlets and other communication materials to make ourselves known.

The intercultural group was thus established, and one Saturday after another there were meetings to discuss attestations, facts of life, narratives, and Monday after Monday, with ballpens ready, coffee, suggestions. These ideas filled our board with projects of shows, discussions, forums...

To be a volunteer. To be a foreigner. To be an emigrant. At this point in the narration of my experience, the second and the third conditions are redundant. Why...? Because when I will put the full stop on this paper, I will start a smile that no doubt you have already been sensing.

Luis Alberto  
A Volunteer –Intercultural Group  
ADSIS-Zaragoza

## HELPING ELDERS TO SMILE

In this context I wish to explain something that apparently many people do not know, or prefer not to know, and it is a hard reality being suffered by many people, elder and tired of living. I had the opportunity to experience this situation, and I am thankful for it. It happened as follows:

One day a lady came to my classroom and explained that she was part of a group called "Open Window", who among many other activities devoted themselves to visit and help and entertain elder people.

On a first occasion I went there myself, and I almost went crying... There was a roomful of women, looking painfully sad, women that had been left aside by their own children, whom they had loved from birth. They were sitting there, some of them on uncomfortable wheelchairs, other on an old and spoiled sofa. I entered the room with fear and anxiety.

What could I do? I approached one of them. She looked at me, and as soon as I spoke to her, her dark eyes became full of light, and her sadness became a great joy. For how long she surely had not seen a young face? She held strongly my hands and explained how much she had loved her children, whom she had lost, and whom she could never more embrace and kiss.

A while later I sat by another old lady. She not only missed a heart to love; she lacked also the vocal chords: she could only emit some smooth and harmonious sounds. As soon as she saw me, she started to intone a melody which I had never heard before. With that music she expressed everything, she conveyed the feelings that she did not want to keep hidden in a corner of her soul. She could not speak, but we understood each other very well.



There are many like them, men and women. Women waiting for the husbands that have left them forever; men who have forgotten the warmth of a home, the taste of friendly, affectionate words. It is hard to see it, but it is also very enriching. You feel your heart beating strongly when you see the smile of someone who thinks that you are that sister that never came. It is very moving, it is the truth hidden behind four stone walls, which for a moment you can convert into honey.

Andrea Viñamata (1st Course Secondary School)  
OPEN WINDOW

## **I AM NOT DISAPPOINTED**

The experience I wish to communicate is this: to accept sincerely the word "volunteer" as a synonym of freedom: I do it because I want; and of gratuitous action: I do not expect anything in exchange. When these two words come into effect, one starts to walk by himself, in a world that is new, open, clean.

I live in a well-to-do quarter in Barcelona. At the door of my house, in the street, a young drugaddict "lives", "sleeps", "begs", "he simply is there". Everybody in the area talks to him. We offer him a job, and he retorts that before he should have an apartment. We reply that without a job he could not pay a rental... etc.

One day he asks me to help him. He recognises his drugaddiction and is decided to leave it. I throw myself into all his needs, we find him a boarding house, we guarantee him food, shelter, and medical treatment. He has some problems pending with the Courts, but we overcome them step by step. So one year goes by, until suddenly he abandons the treatment, and is back in the street, just like "at the beginning". These brackets "" do not have the same meaning for everybody around him. Those who at my request helped him feel disappointed, and tell me "He has cheated you".

I do not feel cheated: I had not made any contract with him. I gave him what he asked from me, in a free and gratuitous way, and what he has received from me belongs to him. I will not ask him to account for what is his own; furthermore, he is not back "at the beginning", he is now richer with all that we have given him.

If my experience as a volunteer is this action in a certain world, I cannot pretend to obtain the results that could be expected in a normal world. Being open to this new world, I am not interested even in the word "results".

I am not disappointed by what we have done together, he is not in debt to me. I rather feel he left me indebted towards all those who, at my suggestion, helped him, and thanks to my relation with him the world becomes clearer, if I continue to love him, the way he is, not his job or his response.

This experience would mean, then, that to become a volunteer is to learn day by day to love people rather than “good acts”.

Pilar Macià  
Hospital St. Joan de Déu  
Barcelona

## **THE JOY OF SAYING "I AM A VOLUNTEER"**

Being a volunteer is a privilege: you live through so many experiences, situations, gratifications that otherwise would not reach you.

The word “volunteer” appears to be now in fashion. One might think that some time before there were no volunteers. On the contrary: I think that if there is now such a flux of volunteering, it is partly thanks to the steady and silent effort of many people who were ready to give generously a large part of their time. Being a volunteer is indeed stimulating, even if sometimes it is also somewhat burdensome. It is not so easy, you need to persevere in the decision to carry out the work that has been entrusted to you.

Otherwise, we are all volunteers, that is, I think that we all have within ourselves a potential volunteer, a silent, unobtrusive volunteer. We all feel sometimes the urge to do something out of generosity.

I believe that we should all make the effort to awake those people who feel the inner need to perform some service, but are not conscious of it. It is also important to be “a long distance runner” as a volunteer, to underline that what is required is the continuous work, done day after day, silently. Volunteering should not be a fashion, a casual illusion.

We can all be volunteers, some in a group, others individually, but I do think that at one moment or another we have all have had the joy of saying: I AM A VOLUNTEER.

Montserrat Mas  
Mans unides (United Hands)

## **THE VOLUNTEER CONTENTS OF MY SERVICE**

It is already one and a half years since I approached the Children’s Home in Raval (a district in Barcelona), in order to offer my voluntary cooperation. I could tell many things about my service there, but I prefer to focus on what the “voluntary” contents of this service has meant for me.

I think that the experience of volunteering changes, at different moments, its meaning and direction. At the beginning you tend to value above all what you are specifically contributing to the real situation in which you work. You are even tempted to expect that this reality has to be grateful for your personal effort. It is only after a certain time, which consolidates the experience, that you start to perceive your voluntary work as something valuable by itself, and therefore relatively independent from the expected benefit of your effort. Only at this point you begin to learn something, when this situation provides you with a training on the facts of real life, establishing a mutual interaction between yourself and this reality, in which you act.

In my specific case, the perspective provided by experience allows me at this point in time to evaluate what voluntary work has taught me. I have learned that anyone has capabilities and qualities that, if applied in a straightforward and earnest way, can be extremely useful in many fields. I have also learned that there are many ways of Volunteering, as well as diverse degrees of engagement.

A further discovery is that volunteering does not consist in filling empty periods in one's time, nor in trying here and there, nor in doing things clumsily... It is a specific model of engagement vis-à-vis a situation that we cannot accept, and where we have to act with energy and decision.

I believe that the practice of Volunteering is absolutely necessary to anybody who feels the urge to experience a personal dimension beyond those that the usual dynamics of our society is offering us: productive work and wasteful, prodigal leisure.



This is why I encourage anyone reading these lines to be a volunteer.

Xavier Muñoz  
Children's house in raval  
Barcelona

## **VANESA, THIS IS THE NAME OF MY VOLUNTEER**

The author of this presentation is a young woman who has resorted to the Project "Liaison", of the Program "Training for Independent Living", of Foundation ADSIS in Valladolid. After living her childhood within the Organisation for Children Protection, and with Shelter Families, on becoming of age she needs some help in her transition to adult life. "Liaison" offers the assistance of a volunteer to young people in this situation, to introduce them into an autonomous life.

Greetings to anyone who cares to read these lines, because what I wish to communicate is important for me.

Vanesa, this is the name of my volunteer, is a great support for me in any respect, because she constantly cares for me, seeing how I am going along. We understood each other very well from the beginning, and I do not see her as a Volunteer but rather as my elder sister.

We have known each other for one year. I am now 18, and live in an apartment for young people already of age, called Service of Transition to Adult Life. I came here alone, everything meant a great change, and she was of great help in this situation. I had never had a family in my life, I have always lived in one form or another of wardenship. All this is a great change indeed, because I have to face my independence, and real life scares me somewhat.



It has been great to meet Vanesa: I feel good when we are together, we have great laughs, but she also makes me think deeply. I tell her everything that happens to me, and she makes me ponder whether my decisions are correct or not. And even when on some occasions she does not agree on some of them, she is always on my side and never fails me. Once I lived through a complex situation, and Vane helped me to take a very difficult decision.



I always advise my companions in the apartment, and anybody who may be in similar conditions, to rely on a volunteer. It is very nice to have someone calling you over the telephone, supporting you, and specially caring for you. Moreover, we practice volunteering together, which is proving to be a beautiful experience, and not so hard with her at my side. In a word, I am very pleased to count on a volunteer, and I thank the people who led me to meet her, because I love Vane very much.

E.A.G.  
Project "Laison" (Enlace)  
Foundation ADSIS - Valladolid

## **VOLUNTEERING WITH YOUR OWN FAMILY**

In a world where egoism and individualism are often predominant, it is good to see that some families educate their children to discover the worth of volunteering, devoting to it a part of their family life.

About every fortnight we go to an old people's Home in Raval (a district of Barcelona). My father, my mother and myself pay them company for a whole afternoon. For example, I play with them games of recollection, of entertainment, sometimes I dance for them, or tell them jokes, we play cards, dominoes, etc...

I serve dinner and medicaments to the old ladies who need more help. Some of them cannot even rise from bed, and I go to their room to talk with them for a while. When I am on vacation, my mother and I sometimes take some of those who are in wheelchairs out for a tour in the street: my mother takes one or two arm in arm, and I myself take care of those in wheelchairs. If the weather is adequate, we often buy them an ice-cream.



One summer we took two ladies for a week in our apartment on the beach, in Segur de Calafell. They suffered from diabetes, they could not eat any sugar, we had to inject them everyday, and I had to serve the meals to one of them whose hands trembled.

Sometimes I feel some laziness to go to their Home, but when I am there I do not wish to leave them, because I feel that I am doing what I should, and because in our day to day life we should find time to do whatever is required. I love them all very much, and they also love me. I can see that they are grateful for our visits. I feel a deep pain when any of them dies.

With my family we also do things to help the immigrants, for example we welcome at home a little girl from Equador on weekends; she needs it because her mother works. We also love each other very much.

Natàlia Burguete  
5th Course Elem. School

## **TO FIND A SENSE IN LIFE**

I have been suffering from Multiple Sclerosis for many years, and naturally on many occasions I have needed help, in particular from my closest family, my wife and my daughters.

For a time I used to think that life did not have much sense; I felt empty, and even living in company I felt alone, disoriented, bored.

My youngest daughter was a radio fan, she enjoyed operating a radio. One day she told me: "Why don't you try it?" It took me some time, but one day I told myself "I have to start today". Even so it took me a while before requesting access to O.S.O.; at last I did it, and as from that moment I recovered myself. Through the radio I knew and met marvellous people.

On one occasion a fellow radio fan told me: "Vicenç, would you like me to collect you tomorrow to go watch a game of room football?" For a moment I hesitated, but finally I accepted. We had never met before, we only knew each other by the voice..

Then I understood what that friend was giving me. I told myself: "from now on I will devote myself to work, within my possibilities, for other people".

Modestly I can say that, one way or another, I have been and I am helping in any way I can. As may be understood not only have I given, I have also received a lot

Since these foregone days, I work in the Catalan association "The Home of the Sick of Multiple Sclerosis". This entails, among many other activities, to talk with people who have just been diagnosed and who in consequence face many problems. By temperament I encourage and I guide them towards understanding what is this sickness and how best to live with it.

This job is always rewarded, among other things, with the joy of helping other people.

Vicenç Raventós i Arquer  
Catalan association  
the home of the sick of  
multiple sclerosis  
Barcelona

## **MY PERSONAL EXPERIENCE AS A VOLUNTEER FROM THE ASSISTANCE TO DRUGADDICTS ASSOCIATION**

In our Association, with which I keep a professional relationship, we decided to organise as volunteers a course addressed to the inmates of the "Quatre Camins" prison (near Barcelona), in order to promote the formation of a group for Volunteer Social Action within the prison, formed by the prisoners themselves, aiming at activities of assistance, leisure, formation, culture, etc. for the benefit of their fellow inmates.

Therefore, since 1992 we have been giving courses (three, and about to start the fourth), for different inmates, so that the volunteer group may go forward without interruption.

I want to leave on record that on the aggregate this experience has been exceptional for me, because it has provided me with a vision of penitentiaries, and particularly of the people therein, very different from the notion I had before. I have met people with an extraordinary degree of sensitivity, solidarity, comradeship and vocation to work. I found there not only people responding to the established image of the delinquent or drug addict, but also many who, in spite of some specific failure, or coming from marginal areas, endeavour to help others offering them as much as they can.

I must admit that quite often I felt unwilling to take the car and drive to the prison in La Roca del Vallès, specially whenever you had been working hard and perhaps you had not even had time for lunch; then you felt quite reluctant to go.

But we did go. And being there was like a therapy; I discovered that even if you were worrying about some problem, or you had a headache or you were in a bad temper, you spent two hours giving your lesson, and you came out in a totally different mood. You felt such a joy that the headache and the bad temper had disappeared. You had savoured the time spent with them, discussing what and how one should be a volunteer, which are the problems and advantages of volunteering, etc. I have learned a lot from them.

Rosa José i Farran  
Assistance to drug addicts assn.  
Barcelona

## TO BE PAID CASH

A good friend of mine used to say that visiting the sailors in their ships is like being paid cash for your service

Some time ago I took for a visit of Barcelona eight hindu sailors of ship with the flag of San Vicente (Caribbean).

We visited the most attractive points of the town, and towards the end of the trip they asked me to take them to one of the beaches of the Olympic Town.

On reaching the Bogatell beach, we sat in a circle on the sand, and one of them offered some refreshments that he carried in a refrigerated bag. Nearby three boys about 8 to 12 years of age were playing football. At a moment two of the sailors got up and, without asking for licence, started to play with the boys, who did not look disturbed, but rather it seemed that everybody was having the time of their lives playing football together. It was pleasant to see that neither the colour of the skin nor the language were a problem when they enjoyed football together.



After about 15 minutes, the hindus were almost exhausted, and then one of them came looking for the refreshments bag, took three coca-cola tins and gave one to each boy, while he caressed their heads affectionately.

As we went out I told him: "You did enjoy this football game with them!" He answered: "For almost 9 months I have not seen my two children, who are about the same age as these boys. In these minutes I have seen my own children in them. I am grateful to you because

today you have given me the opportunity to play a little with my children, and I am very happy".

Isn't this to be paid cash?

Carlos Güetas Bilbeny  
Ship Visitor  
Apostleship of the seas

## **DISCOVERING REALITY**

I am married and I have two children 16 i 19 years old. I am a teacher in a private school. There, for many years, I have been fortunate to share my work with a community of sisters, who have been working more and more with the children, the young and in general with the poorest and most marginalised people of the district of Camp Clar.

About eight years ago, through the sisters, and wishing to know their work in the area, I discovered a reality that had been unknown to me; even if I knew the existence of needy people, I had never been in contact with children and adolescents suffering from so many shortages in all fields: family, affection, resources...

I was deeply shocked by this reality. It led me to question my own life as a christian. I became conscious of the great injustice that those people were suffering. I decided to cooperate and help in any way I could. So I started to cooperate in the Summer Houses, and then I took a more formal role at the House that is open during the whole school course, and which cares for the children from the time they leave the school until seven thirty in the evening. Presently I continue to cooperate in the House during the school course in reinforcement lessons and in leisure activities, and in workshops in summer.

Rosa M. Casanelles  
FRIENDS OF CAMP CLAR ASSN

## **VOLUNTEERING IN LARES**

I will try to summarise my experience in Lares as well as possible, even if it is not easy to convey in words images, odours, recollections and emotions of what I lived there.

First of all I will locate Lares for you. It is situated in the Andes of Peru, at 3.250 m above the sea level. It has about 10.000 inhabitants and it is considered by the Government of Peru as an area of extreme poverty.

People in the Lares district are indeed very poor. Essential goods are beyond their reach: good food, health, education, clothing, hygiene, hot water, etc.

Most of the population is native. Their ancestral habits and traditions are very peculiar. Most of them speak Quechua, and in the school they learn Spanish. But NOT all children can afford to go to school. Some of the families are so poor that they need their small children to work in the fields or take care of the flock.

I cooperated with the parish of Lares, which operates a canteen-shelter taking care of about 55 boys and girls of ages between 6 y 18, who live in the most distant communities, at over three hours walking. This allows them to go to school and have three meals per day.

Father Cayetano manages the project, which survives thanks to the generosity of friends, cooperators and volunteers.

This experience has been very positive. It has infused in me a great dose of optimism and joy. I am now more grateful for many things that I have, and of which before I was not even conscious.

I also went through difficult moments in Lares, when I even doubted of my strength to reach the end. The good moments were however more substantial, and they allowed me to go forward. I found them in the simplest gestures: a look, the smile of a child, the kind nature of the people, their generosity -sharing their very little possessions-, their reception, always warm, caring that we felt at home and that we missed nothing.

To close, I must only tell you that what impressed me most was their JOY, the capability to LAUGH and to be HAPPY in the face of a reality that is SO VERY HARD! This struck me, and I still have to recover from the shock. But I must continue working so that MY FRIENDS in "LA CASITA" (the Little House) of Lares benefit from further help, and can carry out some of their projects, so necessary for their development and survival.

This is my way not to forget them, and to acknowledge so many good things that they have given to me in such a short time.

Alicia Sampietro  
Barcelona

## **TO WORK IN THE NORTH, TO HELP IN THE SOUTH**

My job in the Data Processing Department of the Central Services is of a technical nature, and its purpose is to ensure the operation of the information and communication systems here, in our fortunate side of the world, but I can experience the joy of providing, maintaining and improving the work tools that contribute to carry out our projects in the most efficient and fast way possible.

In an organisation like "Manos Unidas" (United Hands), the ultimate purpose of my service to the poor is to make possible what is impossible, to open gaps in the large wall of injustice, to open doors to the future for those who have no hope. To give such a necessary help in exchange for the greatest of rewards: the great joy of helping those who are in need.

In the objective of Manos Unidas my work acquires full meaning: here every effort obtains an even larger fruit: the miracle of changing things for those who have nothing.

Because of my type of work, I have the opportunity to deal with many people in the organization. And in the years that we have been together, I had the chance to share them with so, so many marvellous persons... I will always admire the dedication and the devotion of all those who endeavour to support the needy. I am really impressed by the great charisma of my fellow workers, striving for the poor, immersed in the joy and the strength of an affection that saturates you as you come to know them. For me it is a real gift to have the opportunity to share my days with them all.

But the key, yesterday, today and everyday is the future; the future that comes to life day after day for our brethren in the South. A future where children can afford to be children, and women and men can be what they want to be, what they need to be: persons with dignity. And this gentle, devoted and disinterested struggle, so fruitful, and to which we are all called, generates all the miracles in which we have faith. This is why I know that we must grow, and grow in them. Because so many people need our help, this is why I am here.

Thanks to Manos Unidas, thanks to all of you...

Raúl Alguacil  
Data Processing, Central Services of "Manos Unidas"

\* \* \*