

All Children Deserve to Go to the Zoo

By Lucia Ledesma

Bolivia is the second poorest country in the Western Hemisphere (Haiti is the poorest), with almost forty percent of its population living below the poverty line. Disabled children in Bolivia have to face double hardships; they inhabit a world where they can barely communicate or function like those around them, and they are often viewed as a burden to society—a punishment from God. With very limited resources, their families struggle to find proper treatment. Thanks to an American organization called the Rosa Vera Fund—whose mission is to improve the health of impoverished, special-needs children in Montero, Bolivia—I had the incredible opportunity over winter break to travel there to meet and document a group of special needs children and their families, most of whom live in extreme misery and poverty. This experience opened my eyes to the limited resources that Bolivians have due to a strapped healthcare system and substandard living conditions, and it gave me a new set of values to take back with me to the United States.

I am experienced in the world of filmmaking; I have won awards at the Montclair Film Festival (Emerging Filmmaker Competition) several years in a row, and I was the production designer on a student feature film. Since my mother is on the board of directors of the Rosa Vera Fund, she had proposed that we both travel to Bolivia to see how the fund operates, and asked if I would capture video footage during the week when we would be visiting, later to be edited into a short documentary. On our first day there, I met with the fund's leadership team; they had told me that filming the lives of these children and their families and creating a documentary was just what the fund needed in order to spread awareness and raise money to keep the fund going. I

knew I could put my skills to the test to show potential donors what these children and their families have to endure on a daily basis, and also how the Rosa Vera Fund has improved their lives by providing medical treatment and therapy, as well as hope and relief.

The entire experience took place in the small city of Montero, outside of Santa Cruz. The handicapped and disabled children who live there used to have to travel more than an hour to Santa Cruz for therapy sessions. This was time-consuming and logistically challenging, so the Rosa Vera Fund raised money to have a special needs school and therapy center constructed right in the center of town. They call it “La Escuelita” (“The Little School” in English). I had the pleasure of visiting the school and documenting exactly what they do for the children there. The first thing I noticed was that, even though the United States has a superior medical system and more resources; the doctors, nurses, therapists and administrators that I met in Montero were the most passionate and dedicated medical professionals I had ever come across. There is only one physical therapist, one speech therapist and one special education teacher for the 22 Rosa Vera Fund patients, but they are completely dedicated to improving each one of their patients’ lives. I watched some therapy sessions and I saw loving, devoted professionals who were truly changing lives for the better. A group of staff from “La Escuelita” had taken the children to the zoo earlier that week, and because there was no ramp at the entrance, they had to carry the kids in wheelchairs up the stairs. Jeanette, the physical therapist, took matters into her own hands to address the zoo’s manager and urge him to add a ramp for better accessibility. She told him, “All children should be able to go to the zoo, not just children who are able to walk up the stairs.”

Another aspect of the trip was visiting the homes of the patients and interviewing the families. There are only 22 families involved in the Rosa Vera Fund; they limit the number so the quality of the care is as good as it can be for each child. Going to the homes was a grim

experience; many families lived in one room shacks with mud floors and hardly any electricity or running water. Some cooked on bonfires, bathed in tin buckets, and went to the bathroom in holes in the ground shielded by wooden planks. While filming the interviews with the families, I learned that most of the patients were children of single mothers. In most cases the father had abandoned the family, leaving the mother to take care of the children on her own, with the additional burden of meeting the needs of a disabled child. One especially sad situation had to do with a young woman I met named Karina whose kidney transplant was paid for by the Rosa Vera Fund. Karina had desperately wanted to go to nursing school but it was not possible for her to work in medicine due to her fragile immune system, and I could see that she was in a deep depression because of that. On the other hand, if it hadn't been for the Rosa Vera Fund, she would not even be alive today.

I am very grateful to have the opportunity to make a film to raise awareness about the amazing work that the Rosa Vera Fund is doing in Montero, Bolivia in helping these vulnerable children. I hope when I complete my final product that my film will be captivating enough to inspire people to donate. Although the fund only takes on 22 disabled and special needs children at a time, it ultimately changes the lives of 22 families struggling to help their children whom they love so deeply. If it weren't for the Rosa Vera Fund, many of the children I saw at "La Escuelita" wouldn't be alive today, and thanks to the therapy classes, many of them have learned to walk and talk, and improve their overall skills. It was inspiring to be able to see the pure love that goes into the care of these children, and how grateful the families were to the fund for coming into their lives and providing help and relief. In the future, I hope to travel to more developing countries where there are stories to tell, and make more documentaries to raise awareness that there is so much we can do to help.

