

CRISTO REY VOLUNTEER TRIP TO BOGOTA, COLOMBIA

By Shelly Murray

Franciscan Blessing Alive in Colombian Mission Work

May God bless you with DISCOMFORT
at easy answers, half truths and superficial relationships,
that you may live deep within your heart.

May God bless you with holy ANGER
at injustice, oppression, and exploitation of people,
That you may work for justice, freedom and peace.

May God bless you with TEARS
to shed for those who suffer from pain, rejection,
starvation and war, that you may reach out your hand to
comfort them, turning their pain to joy.

May God bless you with enough FOOLISHNESS
to believe that you can make a difference in this world,
doing what others claim cannot be done.

An unlikely partner resides a hemisphere away where mountains hover over a city in a bowl of ten million people, Bogota Colombia is intimately connected to Minnesota. Fifty years ago Franciscan Sisters of Our Lady of Lourdes from Rochester, Minnesota opened a convent in Bogota. They then started an all-girls school called Colegio Santa Francisca Romana or "PACHAS" now considered one of the top ten schools in Bogota. Thirty years ago, they added a second school, Colegio Anexo San Francisco de Asis or "CASFA," for children with limited resources. CASFA students walk up and down the mountain to school every day. They work to learn professional skills and go to school six days a week.

This vibrant community remains linked to Minnesota, both by its roots in Rochester and its friend Grace Strangis, the founder of Pathways to Children. Grace, one of 12 siblings from rural Minnesota has two Franciscan sisters. She founded Pathways to Children to support schools in Colombia, Ethiopia and India. She provides trips for students who share her passion for mission work. Unlike other mission programs, however, Grace recognizes those who give most abundantly are found in unlikely places...

The students at Cristo Rey Jesuit High School Minneapolis are also part of a unique program where students attend school four days a week and work the fifth. In exchange for tuition payments, students train for the professional world working in a variety of industries. 95% graduate from high school and nearly all enter college. However, the resume of these students does not begin to tell their story.

Last month, Pathways to Children brought 16 students from Cristo Rey across the Americas to learn about the culture of Colombia from CASFA students. These students were chosen from 80 applicants. When asked why they thought they were chosen, one said they may not know until the future. What is clear is they felt "chosen" not because they wrote a better essay or gave a better interview or had better grades or any other thing really-just

Chosen. For some of them, it is probably the first time in their lives. As he got on the bus to go to the airport, one student handed his phone to a parent because “This is a trip of a lifetime and I don’t want to miss a minute of it!”

Stepping off the bus onto the grounds of CASFA, the Cristo Rey students noticed a giant magnolia tree that somehow survived the surrounding sea of concrete. Its single beautiful white bloom signified the positive outlook of the school community. The older students and certainly the younger ones, likely don’t know the purpose of the plastic sheeting on the classroom windows to prevent injury from shattering glass caused by car bomb attacks in the 80’s. More like a reunion than an introduction, the CASFA and Cristo Rey students became fast friends despite being from different schools, two countries, and four cultures: Colombian, American, Ecuadorian and Mexican. Their connectedness allowed them to pass over the first-meeting awkwardness and dig into the work. And they all gave as if they would never run out.

Early Thanksgiving morning the students headed up the mountain to build a playground out of old tires, paint, scraps of wood and rusty equipment. The work was heavy, hard and hot. In five hours they transformed a gravel lot into a fenced brightly painted park with its own decorated Christmas tree! Another day, students discussed political messages in music from both countries and took a CASFA student guided tour through Calle 26 known as the “street of murals” artists created to explain the peace process in the country’s 45-year civil war. Then they went back to work in the southern suburb of Soacha. This mining town grew from 200,000 to one million in the last seven years and it shows in the dusty streets surrounding the barrio’s single remaining tree. The students’ task was to paint an after school haven for kids whose only fresh water comes by truck once a month and whose school recess was discontinued because drugs were being thrown over the playground fence to entice them to trade.

After several hours of work, one of the women in the community arrived with a huge pot of soup ladled with a hand-carved wooden “cuchara” the size of a dinner plate. She planned to serve 50, but the steamy chicken and plantain broth aroma enticed those living nearby and the line grew. The woman did not stop ladling bowls until 150 people were fed. This modern “loaves and fishes” story serves as an apt metaphor for the students’ deep giving wells. They might not know why they were chosen for the trip, but later recalling this memory, perhaps they will say it was the hand of God on the ladle and sense a deeper meaning in their presence in this place.

Some wonder why those who have less often give more than those with more to give. How do CASFA teenagers walk up and down a mountain twice a day beginning at 6 am, work and attend class until 7 pm six days a week, have anything left to give? The nightly check in with Cristo Rey students took on a theme of humble wonderment at the hospitality, acceptance and love they felt in Bogota. Perhaps the answer lies in the Cristo Rey students’ capacity to receive the grace being offered. Therein lies the definition of CHOSEN.

Shelly Gill Murray