

I Came to Serve

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Quakers and Alternatives to Violence in Bolivia

“Magaly! Magaly! Are we having a workshop?”

“Not this time,” I replied. “Today, I am bringing a friend from England to meet you.” Graham and I had just entered a maximum security prison in La Paz, Bolivia, leaving the guards behind.

Similar to prisons in other Latin American countries, the guards at Chonchocoro Prison are only at the gate. Once inside, visitors are pretty much on their own. The inmates roam freely throughout their area, with no bars and no locks. I assured Graham that my “friends deprived of liberty” would take care that we stayed safe. Bolivia has no death penalty, so Graham felt he was probably shaking the hands of murderers and was glad to know they appreciated me.

These friendships I’ve earned in many prisons are the result of my having introduced the people inside to the Alternatives to Violence Project (AVP). Developed in 1975 by Quakers and other visitors to a New York state prison in response to the request of prisoners, AVP has now spread to five continents. It is a volunteer-run program of experiential learning workshops that seek to develop skills for peaceful conflict resolution, with a better understanding of oneself and others. It is often transformative. One formerly incarcerated friend said, “This taught me who I really am.” I can say the same for myself. AVP is the focus of my life and continues to help me learn.



*Photo January 2009. Danielle Pereira on Flickr
San Pedro Prison in La Paz, Bolivia, where
inmates can roam freely, live with families,
and even run their own businesses.*

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In my Aymara childhood, I learned from my mother, Carmen, about the value of serving others. She was part of a large family in a traditional village on the Altiplano plateau, where life is hard. At age four, she persuaded her father to let her attend first grade with her older brother. She excelled and ached to continue learning, but when Carmen completed third grade at age seven, her father took her to work as a servant for a wealthy family in La Paz. There she spent ten years in painful servitude, sleeping on a cold floor with only scraps of cardboard for bedding and being beaten frequently. Her father collected her salary monthly to help support her younger siblings.

My mother developed a commitment to supporting other women to have a better life. When she returned to her rural community at age 17, she easily spoke her mind and was chosen to represent the community in a women’s rights group.

Despite her lack of education, she was active in politics, advocating for better lives for women. She has inspired me, and now she feels rewarded by my accomplishments in serving others.

I found Quakers in 2002, when I was in my senior year of high school. Through a friend, I met a friendly group of young people who were members of the Christian Club of Young Friends. I accepted an invitation to attend their meeting. Although the service was similar to other churches I had attended, there was something different with the Quakers: I felt truly appreciated, that my life and poverty were not just observed with pity. Friends were motivated to improve my situation with actions, not just prayers. I decided to become a Quaker myself and live out those ideals. Through Friends, I also learned about the Bolivian Quaker Education Fund (BQEF), which awarded me a scholarship that enabled me to complete my undergraduate degree in sociology.

Many are surprised to learn that Bolivia has the world's third largest population of Friends, after Kenya and the United States, and that nearly all of us are Aymara. Certain aspects of our traditional indigenous culture are similar to Quaker values. Community leadership is driven by the search for the common good. The leader is the servant of the community, and the authority must rotate annually among all the families in the community. In many rural communities, decisions are still made in the traditional way. To seek a solution to a problem, all the adults are seated in a circle, waiting in silence for inspiration. Sometimes, one member stands and offers a prayer for guidance.

Although these positive values are shared, our traditional culture also has a strong component of violence. Our Quaker faith builds on the positive aspects of our cultural heritage, but it is transformed by the belief in peace and nonviolence, accepting and respecting each individual as well as oneself. Seeking Truth in this way has uplifted me, dramatically enriching my life and my ability to serve.

In 2010, I decided to write my senior thesis for my sociology degree on the culture of the infamous San Pedro Prison in La Paz. BQEF had offered us the experience of AVP, and I had become an AVP facilitator. When I interviewed inmates to gather information for my thesis, I quickly realized how helpful AVP could be to them. I organized a workshop, and it was so successful that more workshops followed. When the prison administrators heard of the resulting improvement in behavior, they asked me to take it to more prisons. Today there are AVP programs in all prisons in major Bolivian cities and in many smaller ones too. When I look in the eyes of the men after a workshop and see them transformed, it brings tears to my eyes.

My commitment to service and Friends has led to more projects with gratifying results. In early 2019, I was establishing a nonprofit organization for my AVP work, but was told it needed to encompass more than prison work. Just then I learned that my longtime California friend Barbara Flynn was seeking an organization in Bolivia to accept funds and establish and administer a student residence in Sorata to enable students from remote communities to have access to secondary schools. So together we opened the AVP Student Residence just in time for the new school year.



Boys coordinate in jumping rope Leydi wants to be a teacher Cristian-best student in school. Eva is now becoming a teacher.

The AVP Student Residence provides a home away from home for students from remote rural villages to spend school weeks in a supportive environment, with access to secondary education and a wide range of support services to prepare them for higher education.



Later that year we implemented AVP workshops for prevention of violence in relationships, as a way to address **Bolivia's very high rate of domestic violence**. In 2022, these workshops served 20 high schools, with 2,300 students, 250 parents, and 150 faculty members as participants.



One boy, who was regularly beaten by his father said, "Now I know what kind of man I want to be."

Throughout my work, I have met people from many countries whom I consider my spiritual guides: people who guide me, listen to me, accept me, and love me. I have felt their affection, trust, and unconditional support. We are all part of a great family. I feel committed to continue to learn and serve others with joy--for me, this work is my life's purpose.



In August 2022, Magaly received this award from a UN committee in Bolivia.

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