

Princeton in Latin America April Newsletter

Report from the field: Mariana Kim Pro Mujer, La Paz, Bolivia

Driving down the windy road from the El Alto International Airport filled me with the comforting though exhilarating feeling of being back at home. I eagerly scanned my city to spot the changes that had taken place during my absence and automatically noticed the expansion of new roads and homes in the already crowded mountain sides and an invasion of both pro and anti-Evo graffiti (more of the former). But despite these new visual additions to the city and my nearly five-year hiatus from Bolivia, the feeling of my La Paz persisted: the permanent and ageless Illimani and Huayna Potosi mountains still guarded their people from the aggressive external forces of globalization.

Through my PiLA fellowship at Pro Mujer, I have had the manifold blessings of living at home once again, experiencing a different reality of Bolivia that was mostly peripheral to my eighteen years in La Paz, and exploring my academic and career interests at a microfinance institution that helps socioeconomically marginalized women. Although I had no previous experience or knowledge of microfinance, I was eager to further my academic interest in Bolivia, which I began to seriously explore at Princeton as a Sociology major and Latin American Studies certificate candidate. In June 2008, the most appealing factor of the fellowship with Pro Mujer was the prospect of supplementing the academic experience of my thesis on "Informal Lives for an Informal People: the Battle of Bolivia's Indigenous" with more practical knowledge. The Pro Mujer fellowship offered a unique opportunity to continue exploring and



Every September 19th, all of the Pro Mujer clients of the El Alto region take the day off to dance in celebration of their growth through the Organization. This annual commemoration is a tribute to the Institution and is a community event organized by the clients and their families.



understanding the vulnerable female participants of the informal market, which comprises nearly 85% of the Bolivian economy and is a reality for the majority 65% indigenous population. Nonetheless, my past 7 months at Pro Mujer have not only met that expectation, but also far surpassed any additional lessons I had hoped to gain.

As the first PiLA fellow, and long-term intern at the Organization for that matter, I arrived to Pro Mujer with no rigid job description and instead, the challenging though delightful opportunity to orient myself and choose my area of specialization for the year. I spent my first month in a hands-on orientation of Pro Mujer Bolivia's

banking methodology by meeting with the national and regional directors and visiting multiple focal centers, where Pro Mujer clients go to access microcredit loans, health services and training meetings. I was able to both observe the most developed centers that offer computer classes and a childcare center, as well as participate in bi-monthly repayment meetings where the difficulty of repaying loans sometimes challenges the “solidarity collateral” foundation on which our microcredit banking methodology depends.

Following my first month familiarizing myself with the Organization, I realized that despite having no background in public health, I was most keen on the Human Development Services Department in the Pro Mujer Internacional (PMI) and Pro Mujer Bolivia (PMB) offices. Although Pro Mujer currently provides basic health services and orientation to its clients, I was most fascinated by the plans to expand the coverage and impact of these services on a population limited by and to the public insurance of the *Seguro Universal de Salud* and *Seguro Universal Materno Infantil* - health services managed by a structure where political conflicts and corruption take precedence over the urgent needs of the country. As a result, I have dedicated the majority of my time at Pro Mujer to basic yet fundamental groundwork for structuring these changes, through internal market studies, external consultancies and most recently, a joint research study with Harvard University's *Antares Project*.

After completing a client satisfaction and perception market study with PMB's Research and Development team, I worked on an external evaluation of Pro Mujer's human development services with a public health expert hired from Lima, Peru. I spent a week with the external consultant and the PMB National Health Services Coordinator in the field, interviewing health services staff and conducting focus groups with dozens of Pro Mujer clients. During this time, I had the added benefit of travelling to the Santa Cruz and Cochabamba regional offices, where I was able to familiarize myself with each region and visit different centers. Our weeklong field research was continued with more in-depth analysis, as I dedicated my time to a comparative analysis between national poverty measurement methodologies/data and our field calculations of Pro Mujer clients' socioeconomic status. This research and the final presentation were concluded recently and transitioned my work into a new assignment with the Antares Project at the end of March.

Continuing for its second year with Pro Mujer, the *Antares Project* is a joint collaboration between Harvard University's MBA and MPH programs and a local host organization, with the goal of exposing its students to a field-based learning experience and helping the organization on a research project. This year, six students arrived to PMB to evaluate the health services of the El Alto region, and the Antares and Pro Mujer teams are currently working together to develop the final proposal with recommendations on how to improve the structure and provision of Pro Mujer's services.



Mariana with the Pro Mujer Team.

Despite focusing my work on health and human development services, in my past seven months at Pro Mujer, I have participated in a wide array of activities, including the end of the year organizational strategic planning workshop, the HR standardization of job descriptions, and an external evaluation and consultancy of Pro Mujer's IT system. Having been given the flexibility to select my area of specialization and explore different parts of the Organization's work has not only exposed me to the different areas (including challenges) of work at an NGO, but also taught me invaluable lessons that can only be acquired through direct experience in the real world. Beyond the professional and experiential lessons that I will take with me, I have found another home, many friends and even a mentor at Pro Mujer. To me, Pro Mujer is not simply an organization that is a leader in the industry, but a passionate team of dedicated people with a common social mission and shared vision of Bolivia's future.

Though my fellowship is quickly coming to a close, I am more excited for the new experiences and lessons that I will acquire in the next few months. Although I plan on going back to school after my fellowship, I know I will be doing so by leaving behind the home that has shaped who I am and where I will be going, and the traditions of a culture that are still foreign but oddly innate to me. Contrary to any expectations, the comfort and familiarity of Bolivia has given me newfound knowledge and filled me with even more questions and curiosities. Though I have not yet left my country, I cannot wait for my return in the future and I only hope next year's fellow will have an equally fulfilling experience through the exceptional PILA fellowship program.



Mariana at the "End of the year" event at Pro Mujer Bolivia

Report from the field: Mike Hidalgo
Asociacion Alianza Educativa, Bogotá, Colombia

Sometimes it's difficult to believe that less than a year ago I wouldn't have thought twice about skipping my 9:00 am biology lecture. Now my day starts at the break of dawn--5:30 give or take ten minutes--with the sound of my cell phone alarm. Within twenty minutes I leave my apartment built on the slope of a steep mountain that overlooks the enormous city below. After an hour long commute on a metro bus I enter work around 7:00 am ready to start class at the charter school where I have been teaching since September.

At *Alianza Educativa*, an organization founded by the city's most elite university and private schools that run five charter schools in the poor southern sections of Bogota, I am one of two



Above: Mike with 5th Graders.
 Below: Mike with 12th Graders.



people who administer the English program. One of my primary responsibilities was to design the majority of the curriculum for grades 5-12th by reinforcing the teaching of grammar (which for years was inconsistently taught in the schools), writing, and test taking with the teachers. During the past few months I have been working on creating workbooks that include grammar lessons, exercises, and readings specific for each grade level which, when printed later this month, will let teachers know what material they should be teaching at each level.

It's a good deal of responsibility. I chose the grammar the students will learn at each grade level and pick a large portion of their readings for English class as well. In addition, I meet with the twenty-six English teachers from the five schools once a week to improve their English and teaching skills, although I spend the majority of my time at one school in particular where I teach English to 7th and 12th graders and one ethics course in Spanish.

At the same time, as a teacher I am learning far more than I ever could have imagined. Since I started working with *Alianza Educativa*, I have been constantly improving my administrative capabilities, my own planning skills, and my public speaking ability. This placement has not only been tremen-

This unique job has also given me the opportunity to see a side of this city rarely visited by outsiders. *El Tiempo*, the national newspaper, recently brought attention to the fact that the neighborhood with the most homicides in the capital has suffered an expansion of cinder block homes, pool halls, and furniture shops; and this neighborhood is located only 100 yards down the street from the school.

Nevertheless, in this same neighborhood one can find a well maintained tourist information center--the only one of its kind in the capital. I pass by the module twice a day and in eight months have not once seen a tourist use it. Apparently that's not why it's there. The information center, like the equally pristine school down the street where I work, are symbols of the pride the Bogotanos take in their city and, more importantly, their eternal optimism that the future will be far better than the past.

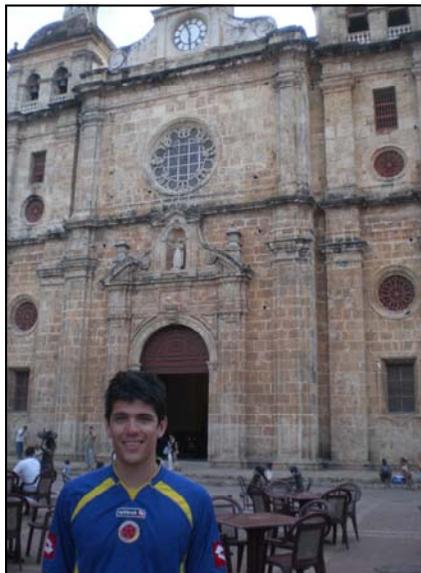
These two values--pride and optimism--are what best describe the attitude in the schools administered by *Alianza Educativa*. They are what make them extraordinary among schools in disadvantaged neighborhoods, and my placement particularly rewarding. Their consistent optimism is no easy accomplishment in a country that is often reminded of its violent past. The school where I teach, *Jaime Garzon*, was named after a popular comedian and satirist who was murdered by paramilitary forces less than a decade ago. This violent past was remembered last week, when the father of one of my 12th grade students was killed while eating bread in a bakery.

Yet despite the numerous hardships these students face, everyone, from the Custodian who comes in on Saturdays to make sure the grounds are spotless, to the Principal who seems to know the name of every one of the 1250 students at the school, is committed to making *Alianza Educativa's* motto a reality: academic excellence for a better quality of life.



Above: Mike at the beach in Santa Marta.

Right: Mike in Cartagena.



Above: Mike in the hills near Bogotá.
Below: Mike in Bogotá's Main Square.



Pictures from the Ariel Homes Project Ensenada, Mexico — Spring Break '09

Three PiLA Fellows: Jason, Sasha and Rosa participated of the Ariel Homes Project during Spring Break 2009. They had the opportunity to build a home for Maria's family and survey numerous families throughout the neighbourhood. We really appreciate all donations received for this purpose. We hope to be able to keep supporting this activity on future breaks!

Right: Maria's home before the Ariel Project.



Above: Maria's home under construction.

Below: Ariel Home Factory.



Above: Maria's family with their new home.

Below: Dinner of PiLA Fellows with Ariel workers.



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Thank you for your continued support and interest in PiLA.