

# From the High Andes to the Jungle...BOLIVIA

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In September 2006, I left Thunder Bay for Bolivia carrying only a backpack, Reciprocating Gait Orthosis, and other assorted physiotherapy tools. Before leaving, I could count the things I knew about Bolivia on one hand. I knew that it is landlocked, one of the poorest countries in Latin America, and that for the first time its people have recently elected an indigenous president. But Bolivia came to mean so much more to me. Over six months, I learned the language which opened many doors, lived with a Bolivian family, joined the local volleyball and swim teams, and explored the country from the high Andes to the Amazon jungle. The people along the way taught me about the difficulties they are faced with every day – such as having no drinkable water, the regressing jungle resulting in the loss of hunting grounds and the fight to grow coca. At the same time they also showed me their strong family bonds, culture, survival skills, and how to fish for piranhas! I felt privileged to visit and live in little communities that hadn't seen many 'white people and blue eyes'. Without a doubt, the six months in Bolivia were a roller coaster, emotionally and physically, and raised more questions than answers.

For two months I volunteered in two different children's treatment centres located in the surrounding area of the large city of Cochabamba. In one centre (CAPEDIS), the children live there full-time and can stay as long as they want – including into adulthood. At the other centre (ATENDI) some of the children come during the day, others come only for the treatment sessions. Both have a very warm, welcoming atmosphere and highly motivated staff. These children are very fortunate to have a place at one of the treatment centres as there are still many, many children living without basic services and support.

The centres are staffed with a part-time physiotherapist, speech and language therapist and a social therapist who teaches social and fine motor skills. The centres are located in poor areas and are not funded by the government. They are only able to run thanks to donations by external and internal



Physio Pascale Baumann at CAPEDIS Children's Centre

supporters. Families pay only what they can and some children have their whole stay, including transportation, fully subsidized by donations. In order to supplement funds received through donations, CAPEDIS started making crafts that they are able to sell in their shop in the city centre.

The children in the centres are severely handicapped and arrive in a mishmash of wheelchairs or carried by their parents. Donated wheelchairs are mostly adult sizes and need many adaptations to make them suitable for the children. Some children are

unable to leave the building as their wheelchairs are too hard to handle on the uneven, cobblestone or sandy roads. For the ones who do not have a wheelchair and rely on their parents to carry them from place to place, most of their day consists of lying down on their beds.

Children with disabilities are usually not seen on the streets or in the cities. This may be due to no wheelchair accessible transportation and mobility difficulties, the stig-

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Are you looking for ways to get involved and give back to your profession? Do you like helping others? If you want to feel great about yourself and the work you do please visit the following websites for various volunteer opportunities locally and internationally.

<http://www.projects-abroad.org>

Projects Abroad is an organization that specializes in volunteer placements around the world. This site provides various volunteer opportunities related to physiotherapy, teaching, conservation, medicine, care & community, journalism and many more.

<http://www.honduranchildren.com>

Friends of Honduran Children is a not-for-profit organization that seeks to provide sustainable programs to Hondurans

in their effort to rescue children from poverty and enable Hondurans reach self-sufficiency. Through their Peterborough Medical Brigades, Friends of Honduran Children gathers volunteers of various skills and expertise to provide medical and dental care to remote areas of Honduras.

[www.physiotherapy.ca](http://www.physiotherapy.ca)

Members of the OPA and CPA are reminded to take advantage of the Mentorship Matching Program and share expertise across the province. Visit the CPA website to find out more about how you can get involved and contribute to the advancement of the physiotherapy profession.

[www.electionsontario.on.ca](http://www.electionsontario.on.ca)

Are you looking to exert more political influence? Why not start locally by meet-

ing with your MPP about a professional issue, or go even further and volunteer for a local or provincial candidate. The Elections Ontario website provides a variety of information on Ontario provincial elections. By clicking on the Candidates & Parties you can access information about various candidates in your area.

<http://www.campbucko.ca/volunteer.html>

Camp BUCKO, located at the Kinark Outdoor Centre facility near Minden, provides an opportunity for children recovering from burn injuries to meet other children who share similar feelings and experiences in a camp environment. They are always looking for physiotherapy volunteers to work with the children. Time commitment is one week in August.

## Bolivia

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ma of having a disability, or numerous other challenges that the children and their families are faced with. However in one centre that I visited, the children were practicing to participate in the dances for Carnival – one of the most important festivals in Bolivia!

One of the many unforgettable people I met in CAPEDIS was Maria Luz. She became quadriplegic after being involved in a car accident at the age of twenty. Unfortunately car accidents account for many injuries and fatalities in Bolivia. In that car accident, she lost her baby boy, her husband and her physical independence. She now is reliant on a manual wheelchair and sits on a plastic inflatable cushion, but Maria Luz always has a smile ... and is now learning how to paint!

My experience volunteering started with getting to know all the children, my colleagues, the function and resources (or lack thereof) of the centres. Gradually, as mutual trust was established, discussions regarding certain treatment options arose and became a collaborative, problem-solving experience. Thanks to e-mail, this will be



Mobility is a real challenge

able to be continued. The physiotherapist carries out all of the children's treatment; however parents are included in teaching sessions during the weekends and are invited to attend the regular treatments. I was pleased to be involved in initiating home programs for the children to practice over the Christmas holidays.

Volunteering as a physiotherapist in an environment with limited resources made me realize how much I rely on certain equipment and toys. Suddenly I had to think about reaching the same goals but with any spare objects that we had on hand. We worked side-by-side with the children,

and as a result, were able to work longer with each child. We listened to their stories, studied chemistry during gait training, laughed and had lots of fun.

But the connection to Bolivia doesn't stop here; I hope to continue to find ways to get wheelchairs, braces, seating cushions and other needed physiotherapy supplies to my friends and colleagues. I would like to thank Shopper's Home Health Care in Thunder Bay for their donation of an Exercise Ball and Theraband which I was able to bring to the ATENDI centre. I am interested in collecting equipment as well as hearing of any other connections to organizations that are able to donate pediatric equipment to Bolivia. I can be contacted at [pascale.baumann@gmail.com](mailto:pascale.baumann@gmail.com).

Together with this request for equipment I would like to take the opportunity to stress the importance of having a physiotherapist accompany the donated equipment. The physiotherapist would be invaluable in training and educating the local staff at the centres on the rationale and use of the equipment.

This has been an experience that will last forever and lifelong friendships have been developed! Thank you.