

Taylor Kahnke, '08

Cochabamba, Bolivia

For my summer of service, I traveled to Cochabamba, Bolivia, with Krzysztof (Kiko) Drzymalski. When we first arrived, we assisted with medical examinations in Layrete, an underserved town of indigenous people. Unfortunately, we were not able to interact with the people in the close and personal way that we had hoped. Through the hand of providence, we found the Hogar de Ninas San Francisco orphanage, which housed 57 young girls ranging from one to 19 years of age. The girls had come to the orphanage through a wide variety of unfortunate circumstances, and the staff of nuns who operated the orphanage endeavored to ensure that all of the girls received the love, care, and educational opportunities they rightfully deserved.



Each day Kiko and I helped prepare the food to be served to all of the children, and we fed those who were not yet able to feed themselves. Preparing food in a developing country is a very different proposition than it is in the United States; all food is prepared through hard work, including the shelling of peas and beans and the peeling of melons. Feeding the young children was a delightful experience. I cannot fully articulate the depth of connection and the sense of care that develops when you are willing and able to provide another person with his or her basic human needs, and preparing food is no exception.



Every day Kiko and I escorted the three youngest children to and from their kindergarten class. Although the walk to school was only a short distance, even such a short journey was not safe for young children to make by themselves. Walking the children to school both ensured their safety and enabled them to become educated, a privilege that many people living in developing countries do not have. As you can appreciate from the pictures (above), the children we escorted were beautiful, and we were glad to do whatever we could for their benefit.



Brenda (top) and her older sister Anabel (bottom) were two of the students whom I had the privilege of teaching. Equipped with eager, young, and capable minds, they are sure to fulfill their highest aspirations. Every afternoon, all of the children would sit down to study their class lessons. While Kiko worked with the younger children, I helped the girls in grades 6-9 polish their skills in English, mathematics, and the sciences. Although I was able to teach them a great deal pertaining to academics, they taught me a lesson that is infinitely more important: that while I and they shared very little in terms of our language and culture, we all shared an interest and curiosity about one another and a sincere desire to connect with each other on a personal level. Most simply stated, the children helped me to better understand that we are all members of humanity -- a bond that transcends all boundaries.



The night before our departure, the nuns and all of the children of the orphanage threw a surprise party for Kiko and me. While this was more than anyone could have ever asked for, perhaps more meaningful was the surprise that came on the day of our departure. As Kiko and I stood in line to print out our boarding passes at the airport, we were stunned when we were approached by two of the nuns -- Sister Anna (left) and Sister Mary Ellen (right) -- with several of the children at their sides. Their effort to see us off on our flight home verified that our efforts were indeed appreciated.