

# Habitat Exper

## Franciscan



Stone by stone, St. Francis rebuilt three little churches. Franciscan parishioners from the United States are building houses—and finding the faith of builders and inhabitants strengthened.

**BY PATRICIA ZAPOR**

**T**HE BOLIVIANS were a bit baffled, trying to imagine what the *gringos* were doing in Cochabamba. “We thought, *Who is going to pay their own expense, for their tickets for the trip, pay for their food, only to come here to help a Bolivian family?*” says Elías Agreda Dia.

Five days after meeting them, Agreda and his family, along with a second family of Cochabambinos from across the city, were quite sincerely inviting these people, who were now departing, to come back to visit, “even if there are 100 of you.”

Tears welled up all around at the music- and dance-filled *desperdida* or going-away party, as the two families thanked the teams. They had, in the space of a workweek, helped



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PHOTO BY CHERYL MURPHY



(Far left) St. Camillus choir director Jean Cook (at left) and Chris Fedoryshyn span the ages of those who helped build the Illanes family's new Habitat house.

(Left) Rosemary Lawson, on her first visit to a developing country, poses with a Bolivian vendor as she revels in the colorful handiwork at the local marketplace.

(Below) Father Mike Johnson, wearing a white hat, posed with the St. Francis Builds team at the party which concluded their weeklong stay.



PHOTO BY MIKE MIEHL

make reality of their dreams of having homes of their own.

Olinda Ojeda Villegas and her husband, José Simón Illanes Andrade, were similarly surprised by the power of spending a week working side by side with strangers from the United States. Like the Agreda family, Ojeda had expected the Habitat for Humanity team that came to help build her house would be “closed, hard to get to know” and that communicating would be difficult.

“We all fear what is unknown, right?” Ojeda observes. “But in reality they were very kind and caring. They explained things. They helped with everything and we got used to them.”

Two weeks after the U.S. team left, Ojeda was wistful about the group that had helped build the walls and foundation of her house. “Now it’s like we are lacking something.”

## Not Your Typical Tourist Itinerary

The *gringos* about whom Agreda and the Illanes family first puzzled, and then missed, were the second team to travel to Latin America in 2006 as part of a fledgling program sponsored by the Holy Name Province of the Franciscans, called St. Francis Builds. It launched out of St. Camillus Church, a Franciscan parish in Silver Spring, Maryland, with groups that built houses in Guatemala in March 2006 and in Bolivia in June and July.

All Habitat for Humanity programs are designed to have a nondenominational spiritual component. St. Francis Builds offers elements of Franciscan spirituality to U.S. builders.

In the St. Francis Builds model, preparatory sessions ahead of time, daily spiritual reflections and private journaling add





PHOTOS BY MIKE JOHNSON

This down-at-the-heels but occupied adobe house with its tin roof is a typical dwelling for many of the poor families of Cochabamba, Bolivia.

a retreat-like layer to what otherwise might be just a socially conscious alternative vacation. Side trips to nearby venues no travel agent would book—such as Bolivia’s notorious El Abra Prison and a refugee-like camp for families displaced in a devastating 2005 Guatemalan mudslide—give participants a glimpse at life beyond even the rustic, laborers’ world they sample on Habitat work sites.

“This was so much more fulfilling than a vacation,” says Chris Fedoryshyn, then a Siena College senior from Pittsfield, Massachusetts, who made his first trip outside the United States or Canada for the Bolivia project. He admitted to being a bit uncertain, especially about the health risks of visiting a developing country. But he quickly got past that as he worked on the Illanes family home.

“The poverty is a little shocking,” he says, “but by the end it felt almost like home.”

Susan Lee, a counselor at St. Ignatius College Preparatory School in San Francisco, made her second Global Village trip and her first with St. Francis Builds. After building houses in El Salvador a year earlier, Lee knew what to expect in the way of cultural differences and overwhelming poverty.

But she was again struck by how even the most basic of expectations about a

mission trip gets turned on its head.

“You go down there thinking, *We’re the wealthy Americans. We’re going to go to this poor village and help them,*” she says. “Then you get there and you’re not working for them, but with them. You very quickly lose the feeling you’re

doing anyone a favor. You become humbled because they’re the strong ones.”

### Everyone Teaches, Everyone Learns

For their part, the Agreda and Illanes families found more than their expectations changing. Their own ideas about helping other people were challenged.

“I remember how my house was growing day by day, every day higher and higher,” Agreda says. “I was delighted, seeing all these people working with such enthusiasm. How could I not, with people coming from that far away to help us when we don’t know how to help our own Bolivian neighbors? We need to learn this from them.”

The North Americans found plenty to learn from the Bolivians as well.

Harrison Christian, then a 19-year-old sophomore at the University of Chicago, wrote in a reflection about the trip that his experience taught him the meaning of St. Francis’ teaching: “Preach the gospel. If necessary, use words.”

“When I signed up for the St. Francis Builds trip to Bolivia, I must admit that I did not know what I was getting myself into,” Christian wrote.





“The first day on the work site, I realized that I had no choice but to heed these words of St. Francis. I had come to Bolivia with a Spanish vocabulary consisting of about 20 words. Speaking was not an option.”

That didn’t turn out to be as much of an obstacle as the Great Books major from Lynchburg, Virginia, thought. “We may not have spoken the same language or come from the same background, but in Elías and Juana’s household I was accepted and loved like family,” he says.

“I do not think I truly understood St. Francis’ principle of ‘preaching the gospel’ until I worked in Bolivia. In retrospect, I realize that in order to grasp his words, one must experience Francis’ meaning. That is exactly what happened to me at the work site,” he wrote. “I saw the gospel in action, I lived the gospel, I saw God working in and through all of us. Words were not necessary because there was love.”

Luz Cabrera, a St. Camillus parishioner who emigrated from Peru 12 years ago, worried about many things before joining the group: a tendency toward

altitude sickness, chronic stomach trouble and whether, at 65, she would be able to do heavy work.

None of those was a problem, and she thinks it was a matter of God watching out for her. Perhaps also, she observed later, it was due to the blessings of the Bolivian people.

“They offered all that they had for us,” she said. “Interacting with them was beautiful, nourishing for the soul.”

**From One Room to Room for Everyone**

The Agredas’ house, completed shortly after the St. Francis Builds team left, gives the couple and their two children, Elías, five, and Jhesenya, 10, their own home for the first time.

When they applied to Habitat, Agreda, his wife, María Juana Molina, and the children lived together in a single room, about 12 feet square, in a friend’s home. They had no bathroom and cooked in a corridor.

Their new brick home has three bedrooms, a bathroom, a living/dining room and a kitchen. “The house is just beautiful,” says Molina. “I know it is going to change our lives. Living before

in just one room wasn’t really living.”

Her husband, an electrician, expects his family’s life to be easier. “We will be able to really cook,” Agreda says. “We are going to have a much better life.”

The Agredas’ home was celebrated in August as the 6,000th home completed since Habitat for Humanity of Bolivia was established in 1985.

**A Place of Their Own**

The Illanes family had even less of a place to call their own before they qualified for a six-room Habitat house. “We lived in my parents’ house, sometimes in my father-in-law’s house,” says Illanes. “We were switching from one house to another from time to time.”

He and his wife decided to move to Cochabamba from the countryside so their children, Alex, now 13, and Patricia, now 17, could go to school. But they were dependent upon relatives to keep a roof over their heads.

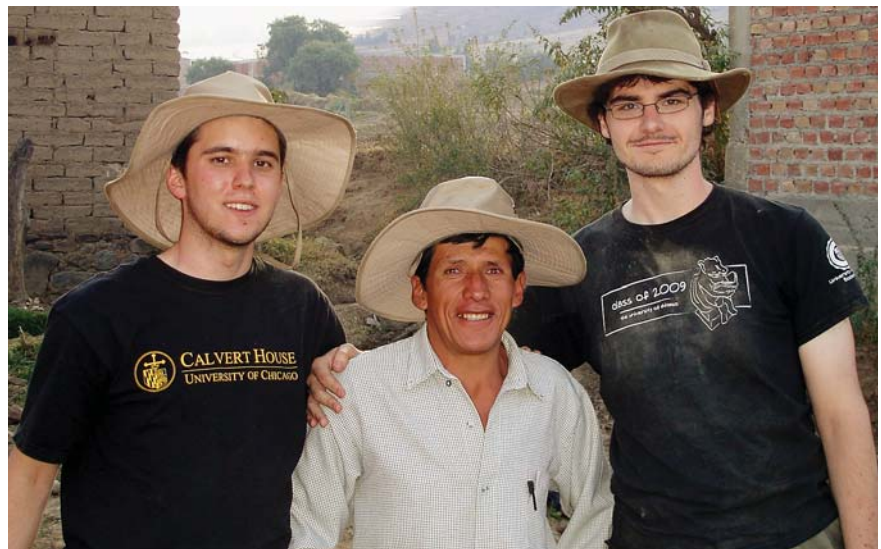
“We have wanted to have our own house for 15 years,” says Ojeda. As merchants, however—they bake and sell bread in the market—they had little money and no chance to save.

“Some days we didn’t even have money for food,” she says. “If it weren’t for Habitat, we’d be still living with our parents or with other relatives.”

“We are going to be more at peace now,” Ojeda says. “We are going to be independent, with more privacy. Sometimes it was a little bit difficult to live with our parents,” she acknowledges. “There were arguments about one thing

(Left) Jhesenya Agreda, 10, helps Rosemary Lawson construct a block wall in what became the first home the Agreda family has owned. Reinforcement is vital in earthquake-prone Bolivia.

(Below) Harrison Christian (left) and Will Stahl tower over Modesto, Jhesenya Agreda’s uncle. Extended families typically join in building Habitat houses.



or the other. We are not going to have that anymore."

Her husband looks philosophically at how he ended up living with his parents and in-laws. "Before marrying, a couple has to prepare first to have their own house," Illanes says, "even if it is very small. But here we start in reverse. We fall in love blindly and we immediately marry. And then we realize we need a house to live in."

That's not so easy to accomplish in the poorest country in South America, where per-capita income is calculated by the World Bank at \$960 a year. Habitat estimates that more than half of Bolivia's 8.2 million people live in substandard conditions.

The price of a house through Habitat in Bolivia is about \$3,700. Homeowners pay mortgages of about \$25-\$30 a month over eight years. In September 2006, the Franciscan friars in Bolivia (Province of St. Anthony) agreed to contribute \$100,000 for the purchase of land for Habitat houses. That assists with another part of the housing challenge.

Habitat for Humanity's Global Village participants each contribute \$350 for the construction. That and airfare, meals and lodging run about \$2,000 per person.

### Inspired by Global Village Experience

St. Francis Builds grew out of Franciscan Father Mike Johnson's 2005 vacation experience, when he joined 17 strangers in an open Global Village "build," as they're called, in Retalhuleu, Guatemala.

Part basic physical labor, part cross-cultural bonding opportunity and part up-close experience with life among poor, working-class families, the Global Village mission is simple: provide an opportunity for groups of people to experience global ministry, working alongside homeowners worldwide.

As in U.S. Habitat projects, homeowners must do some construction themselves, typically along with extended family or friends. Habitat hires professionals to oversee the work and to complete parts of the job that

PHOTO BY ROXANA MEHL



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—Father Mike Johnson

call for expert training. In Latin America, *albañiles* or masons are the supervisors for both family members and volunteers.

From start to finish, construction of the simple reinforced block or brick Habitat houses built in Latin America takes no more than a few weeks. So, depending upon complications such as bad weather, Global Village volunteers may see a house rise from foundation to roof-ready in their week on the job.

Father Mike had lived and worked in mission settings in Latin America frequently since joining the friars in 1995, so the reality of life in a developing country wasn't news to him. The transformation he witnessed in Retalhuleu, however, affected him deeply.

"The participants' eyes opened to the reality of how life is lived in the rest of the world," he says. But that unsettling understanding was paired with the realization that they could do something to change the situation for at least a few people, he saw. Meanwhile, volunteers and the homeowners rapidly developed a strong sense of community.

Father Mike thought the experience echoed St. Francis' response to the call of God—rebuilding churches that had fallen into ruins, the first steps in his larger mission of rebuilding and transforming the Church and Francis' world.

"As I worked on these houses, I thought, *This is so Franciscan: solidarity with the poor, peacemaking, simplicity of life, community in mission, ecumenism, raising social-justice consciousness,*" he says, listing some of the ways he sees the project resonate with the values of Franciscan spirituality.

"Life-changing" is how Father Mike describes his first Habitat trip. Before long, he went on another weeklong "build" in El Salvador, completed Habitat's leadership training course and started recruiting volunteers.

Habitat's Global Village program attracts far more people who want to make a trip than there are available slots, he learned. While there are plenty of houses being built that could use the assistance of an outside team, there's a perennial shortage of trained leaders to take groups. One goal of St. Francis Builds is to inspire others to lead future groups.

### U.S. Cross-stitch Sampler

The first St. Francis Builds trip brought a dozen volunteers to Guatemala's western highlands in March 2006. Bolivia was chosen for the second trip last summer because of Father Mike's longstanding ties to the Franciscan community in Cochabamba, where he has worked as a chaplain at El Abra Prison at least part of every year since 2000.

The 14-member team that went to Bolivia represented a cross section of America. They ranged in age from 19 to 65 and included two Latin American immigrants, three college students, several teachers, a federal security agency worker, a yoga instructor and an occupational therapist. The majority were St. Camillus parishioners, but others came from California, Illinois, Massachusetts, New York and Virginia.

Rosemary Lawson, who works as a housing counselor for Montgomery County, Maryland, was one of several participants who had never visited a developing country, except for vacations in tourist areas of the Bahamas and Barbados.

After initially finding the dramatic poverty and crowded city a bit bleak



and depressing, she quickly came to appreciate Bolivia and its people. By the end of the week, Lawson was known to the families and stonemasons at both house sites as the joyful woman who liked to dance.

Molina described watching Lawson work on a scaffold one day, dancing to music on the radio as she worked.

"I was working below her and was a little afraid she would fall on me," Molina joked later. "She didn't care. She was very happy, dancing smoothly, like she was walking on a flat street as she moved from side to side."

Like other first-time visitors to poor countries, Lawson says it's been an adjustment to reconcile American consumerism with the simple life she saw in Bolivia.

Particularly viewed through the lens of her work for the county, where she helps low-income and homeless people find housing, she found, "Expectations are so different."

"Here, even though people have no money, they expect an awful lot, like to be able to move into a full town house," through the county housing program, she says.

Fedoryshyn, who's studying economic development, said his first couple of days back in Massachusetts felt surreal. "You become so much more

aware of the excesses, and of what we've lost in the culture of family," he says.

Mary Ellen Gilroy, vice president for student affairs at Siena College in Loudonville, New York, had participated in service trips previously, though this was her first with Habitat.

She was struck by the ways construction, and other parts of everyday life in Bolivia, could be so much easier. "There wasn't even a tractor or a backhoe," she noticed. "They build everything from scratch."

The one married couple on the trip, Mike and Roxana Miehl, both public school educators in Maryland, were conscious of optimistic attitudes they found among Bolivians, especially in contrast to Roxana's home country, El Salvador.

"There was such a sense of hope," says Mike Miehl. "When I've gone to El Salvador, everybody seemed to want to leave. But in Bolivia, people I asked about that said they wouldn't want to go."

Roxana Miehl said of the country she left at age eight: "There's so much pain there. The war crushed a lot of people's spirits."

### Hope and Purpose

The Bolivians' hopeful attitude was particularly evident at, of all places, El Abra Prison, which the team visited as

part of their introduction to the nation's culture. In the last decade, outside donors have enabled the creation of 14 industries there, such as shoe-making and wood crafts. Besides providing job training and giving inmates a way to support their families while they're jailed, the industries changed the tenor of life in the prison.

"There was such a sense of purpose in life, that they had a chance to better themselves," Roxana Miehl says.

The hopeful atmosphere at the prison, at a privately run orphanage the group visited and in the families they worked with also stayed with Jean Cook, a choir director at St. Camillus and a retired schoolteacher. She celebrated her 65th birthday while on the Guatemala trip and then joined the Bolivia one three months later.

Several weeks after their return, Cook says she was again finding that she really missed the St. Francis Builds group, despite being quite happy to be back home in Greenbelt, Maryland. "I don't know what other kind of experience you can have where you come together so quickly with strangers," she says.

The spiritual components were what made all the difference, both Gilroy and Cook say. "I found it to be a very contemplative experience," Gilroy says. "The gospel really came through to me."

Cook says she couldn't envision "being able to do work like that without the spiritual grounding. Otherwise, the inconveniences, the hard parts of seeing the way people live, would be overwhelming." A

**To learn more about St. Francis Builds, visit [www.stfrancisbuilds.org](http://www.stfrancisbuilds.org), write Mike Johnson, O.F.M., at 1600 St. Camillus Drive, Silver Spring, MD 20903 or call 240-413-0229. The Web site includes links to Habitat's Global Village. Web visitors will learn that St. Francis Builds is working in El Salvador this month.**

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Mary Ellen Gilroy and Elías Agreda Dia (whose wife María is at the far right) lead a dance new to *gringos* as they celebrate their week of working together.