

My name is **Shane Donnelly** I was a volunteer for **LASCO** (Latin American Street Children Organisation) based in **Cochabama, Bolivia**. I was working in the Espacio Alternativo (Alternative Space) project which works with the street children/population of Cochabama.

I was working in Bolivia for just over a year and I have now been home around six months. **In reflection** I can hardly recognize my naïve and inexperienced self. When anyone decides to do this type of work it's often for a variety of reasons. However all volunteers develop one thing in common when they start working and that is the overwhelming gravity of what lays ahead of them. Before I went to Bolivia I was of the perception that I had the answers and could make a real difference. This western mentality was soon challenged and dashed. In reflection and with experience I am now able to appreciate the complexity of the problems and how hard this type of work is.

**Having arrived back home** in Ireland there was two themes that I was faced with time and time again. The first was the slaps on the back and people telling me how great I was. I found this very strange and difficult because I have been blessed with this opportunity to work with these kids who have taught me so much about life. I felt like a fraud taking this praise because I receive a lot more from these children than I give.

The second theme was the double barrow question people asked and that's what do you do out there and what's it like there? When I reply that I work with the street children they often don't seem to grasp the concept. They just hear two words; street and children but it's much deeper than that. When I say street I have to try and paint a picture for them so I describe where the children live. And that's under a bridge where there only cover is a few plastic sheets. There is no amenities except for the river which is there toilet, bath, washing machine and ever there source of drinking water.

The second word children in its own are only a word so I describe some of the children to them. The children's age range is from babes just a few months or years old, to kids nine-ten years of age to teenagers. And we I was explaining this to my friends I used reference points that these street children are the same age as they own children or little brother or sister. It was when I made this point that the penny seemed to drop and people couldn't imagine children in this situation. The only thing these children have in life is each other a community of children and sadly the street. These children are on the street for a variety of reasons but mostly it's because of physical or sexual abuse in the family home or the death of parents or the mother often resulting in the father abandoning their children. In Bolivia there is no social service or very little protection for these children and this is where we come in. Our projects alongside other institutions are often the street children's only outlet, where we provide a safe and stable environment for these children.

So that's **who we work with so what do we do?** Well first of all we are the first and often the only contact these children have. On a daily bases we provide a safe, healthy, fun, educational, loving and drug free environment for the children. Sadly a common characteristic of a street child is drug dependence where the drug of chose is glue. Are children sniff glue for a variety of reason for example to keep hunger and the cold at bay but the main reasons is to forget there past and help them survive there current situations. Ever day we go to the river where the children live and after taking to them we physically take them to our centre where they have the opportunity to be kids. And that's a very important point we let the children be children as living in the street they haven't got this opportunity.

We provide the facilities for the children to have a shower, provide a good and often there only meal of the day, play football, chess and other board games, to express themselves though painting, to learn how to read, write and number work and most importantly to listen to them. We provide a listen ear service for our children where we give them the opportunity to express how they feel or what problems they are facing.

Our organization is no the street ever day so we have become a regular fixture in the lives of many of these children. Our aim is to be the bridge between the street and the children homes. We work intensively with the children that have been on the street for some time to prepare them to enter a children's home or where possible re-entry the family unit. We are there on the street to meet new children entering the street therefore we try and get these children a suitable home as quick as possible. Therefore we work in conjunction with other institutions to provide the opportunity for our children to leave the street and to integrate our children back into society.

So the second question **what is it like?** This question is very difficult; I find it extremely difficult to articulate my emotions and experience in Bolivia. But I can clearly say that it's the best and most rewarding thing I have done in my life to date. The children have given me so much, the work at time can be frustrating because often you don't see a difference or because you have to leave the children back to the river and there situation after having a great day with them. But step by step we are making a positive contribution to the lives of these children which I am extremely proud to be a part of.

Since moving back to Derry I have been employed by Divert which is an alcohol and drugs education and prevention project therefore some of the issues and experiences that I gained in Bolivia have been transferable to help those in my local community. In terms of my experience in Bolivia that will never leave me in fact I have found it quite difficult to settle back in to live in Ireland. However to keep involved I am now a member of the LASCO committee.