



Bogotá Connections

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The BOGOTÁ EXPERIENCE: *Building Community in Bogotá*

By Sister Valerie Usher

So, just what was “the Bogotá Experience?” It was conceived by collaboration between the Cojourner Advisory Council (CAC) and the Bogotá Franciscan Community as a way of building on CAC’s efforts to find ways of creating stronger relationships between Sisters and Cojourners. The Rochester Franciscan Community experienced a Sister-Cojourner Weekend at Assisi Heights in 2012, as well as a Together Week at Assisi Heights in 2013, so the creation of a U.S.- Bogotá opportunity seemed like a wonderful extension of what had already begun.

From its earliest dream stage, the Bogotá Experience was imagined as:

- an experience of daily community life,
- an opportunity for communal prayer and faith sharing,
- a closer look at the various ministries of the local Bogotá community,
- a review of the historical presence of the Rochester Franciscans in Colombia over the past 51 years,
- a chance to offer one’s services in a variety of contexts,
- the opportunity to see and taste a bit of the Colombian culture,
- a setting in which to deepen relationships and imagine together the shape of our shared future as a Congregation.

Those who participated in the experience can tell you to what extent each of these elements were addressed.

For ten days, nine travelers and seven members of the Franciscan Community in Bogotá became, in effect, “the Bogotá Sixteen,” experiencing first-hand, in fresh new ways, what it means to share “Franciscan Life in Mission.” Those risking the adventure of traveling to Colombia included: Sisters JoAnn Chevalier, JoAnn Haney and Joyce Stemper, along with Cojourners Kathy Johnson, Vivian Valdez, Eileen Lundy and her husband, Ed, and Cathy Nelson and her husband,

Duane. The Bogotá community members receiving the guests were: Sisters Marg Kiefer, Clara Inés Ordóñez, Carolina Pardo, Gema Peña, and Val Usher, along with Gloria Gómez and Constanza Guzmán. Also involved in the exchange were Colombian Cojourners: Soraya Jiménez, Nubia Niño, Abilio Peña, Lucio Rodríguez and José Antonio Torres. Four of the travelers moved in with the Sisters in the main Convent, while the other five took up residence in the Portiuncula (a smaller house on the Santa Pacha campus that earlier served as the Novitiate Community.) However, the entire sixteen were virtually together day and night throughout the entire visit.

How did the days unfold? Here is an overview:

Day 1 - A leisurely beginning to the day for a bit of “altitude adjustment!”

- Visited with the new principal of the Colegio Santa Francisca Romana.
- Viewed a video explaining “What IS Santa Pacha?”
- Participated in a tour of the CSFR campus.
- Attended an orientation session to get a sense of the week ahead.
- Enjoyed presentation on the country of Colombia – its geography, resources, history, etc.
- Experienced a community night around the fire with prayer, a “Raclette” supper, and sharing.



Day 2 - A session with members of the InterEcclesial Commission for Justice and Peace.

- Participated in a Prayer Service of Light.
- Joined the local BARAJ Community for an afternoon gathering.
- Viewed a video of the story of the development of Willkapampa (the local community's "farm" and Eco-Spirituality Center).
- Enjoyed a night out on the town while dining on a mountain overlooking the city.

Day 3 - A day at Willkapampa

- Met the animals.
- Provided assistance with planting a tree, as well as flowers around the new grotto.
- Attended an "asado" (Colombian cook-out).
- Some took the opportunity to hike to the nearby sanctuary of Our Lady of the Rosary.
- Others had a chance for some R&R – many opted for a genuine siesta!



Some hearty hikers on their way to a neighboring Shrine of Our Lady. (L to R: Sisters JoAnn Chevalier, Joyce Stemper, JoAnn Haney and Carolina Pardo)

Day 4 - Rochester Franciscan Historical Tour Day

- Watched a video reviewing the 51-year history in Colombia with ALL the community members who have lived and worked there through the years.
- Traveled across the city in a van to visit:
 - › the Parish Church, Day Care and School of the Child Mary in the barrio of San Carlos,
 - › the Department of Nursing at the Javariana University;
 - › Usaquén, the location of the second year of the Colegio Santa Francisca Romana and the Hogar Santa Isabel; and
 - › Barrio Prado Pinzón with its Day Care Center.
- Attended an evening meditation session.



A scene from the barrio where our CASEA students live.

Day 5: "Service Day"

- Watched a video of the origins of the Colegio Anexo San Francisco de Asís (CASFA).
- The morning was spent by dividing up into different service groups:
 - › 2 persons helped in the Social Studies Department of Santa Pacha;
 - › 2 persons assisted in the Music Department of Santa Pacha;
 - › 4 persons gave support to service project with the 9th graders of CASFA; and
 - › 1 person assisted Sister Marg with home visits in the barrio.
- The afternoon was spent at the Center for Impoverished Children with Hearing Deficiencies (CINDA)
- Enjoyed a surprise Serenade!

Day 6: Time serving the Elderly at the Dispensary

- Enjoyed a tour of the Colegio Anexo San Francisco de Asís (CASFA).
- Enjoyed some actual "free time" to explore the neighborhood.
- Joined in a Community gathering for prayer and sharing.

Day 7: Spent a day Downtown.

- Toured the:
 - › Gold Museum,
 - › Main Government Square, and
 - › Well-known churches in the center of town
- Participated in the Zarza Ceremony for Santa Pacha Seniors.

Day 8: Santa Francisca Romana Day

- Participated in the all-school Eucharist with its related activities.
- Joined in the festive celebration of the day: music, dancing, feasting!
- Took a shopping trip to a local artisan fair.

Willkapampa, Sacred Land

By Eileen Lundy, Cojourner

On a beautiful Sunday, during one of our ten days together, the “Bogotá Sixteen,” along with Marina and her crew from the kitchen, traveled outside Bogotá for a cook-out at the community’s farm, Willkapampa, which means “sacred land.” We planted flowers, and planted a tree in honor of our newest novice, Sister JoAnn Chevalier, hiked the hills, basked in the sun, rejoiced with a mother sheep protecting her newborn lamb, and grieved with a mother goat whose newborn kid had been killed by a neighbor’s dog. We lived for a day on that sacred land.

Now, back home in the U.S., we Bogotá Nine will always carry with us the deep knowledge that, while we were there, we walked on lands blest by the work of our Sisters and Cojourners, who have spent over 50 years developing these places into sacred land.

Sister Clara Inés showed us the center where she and others bring the world of sound to children with hearing problems. We visited the nursing program at Javeriana University and saw Sister Jean Schulte’s picture in an honored place. She, along with others, had sown the seeds of what has been named Colombia’s finest nursing education program. We visited the day care center and CASFA, the school in the barrio where the children, who were our guides, held our hands and led us proudly and masterfully through their school. We watched these children and the assembled school body present a special program for us; giving each of us a friendship bracelet at the end. There was joy in the air and the sense of community was palpable. So much has been accomplished with much work and much love.

At a celebration dinner, we watched the stage fill with members of the Colegio Santa Francisca Romana (Santa Pacha) community who had completed 5, 10, 15, 20, 25, 30, 35 years of service: kitchen workers, teachers, gate-keepers, administrators, staff, and faculty. It was a joyous evening. And we danced as Sister Marg played the bongo drums with the faculty band. We told stories. We listened as Sister Carolina explained



The “Bogotá Sixteen” (minus S. Clara Inés Ordóñez) gather around Francis and Clare at Wilkapampa. (L to R: Sisters Gema Peña, Val Usher, JoAnn Chevalier, Eileen Lundy, Ed Lundy, Sister Carolina Pardo, Kathy Johnson, Sister Joyce Stemper, Constanza Guzmán, Duane Nelson, Cathy Nelson, Vivian Valdez, Sister JoAnn Haney, Sister Marg Kiefer, Gloria Gómez)

what we were seeing while we traveled to sites in Bogotá, with Constanza taking pictures, and Gloria helping with our various levels of Spanish. We learned facts about Colombia. We heard about the displaced persons being helped through the group Justicia y Paz, the group for which Sister Gema works, putting in long hours every day. We helped serve lunch and visited with a group of older women and men who come for lunch and clinic visits each week. (I remember you, Isabel, Manuel, Josefa. Your faces are beautiful).

Sacred land, holy ground, it was there, wherever we followed the footsteps of our Franciscans. For over 50 years, they have sown the seeds of community, of peace and healing, of the justice of sisterhood and brotherhood, and of the joy that results from their efforts. We, the Bogotá Nine, thank you for all of this. “Bienvenidos” is what you wrote in our welcoming folders. “The Bogotá community welcomes you into our homes and our lives.” You did that for us and more. You showed us the Franciscan legacy that has been created for over 50 years. Thank you for walking with us in *willkapampa*, the sacred land, the holy ground.

Day 9: An all-day trip to one of the “wonders” of Colombia: the Salt Cathedral.

- Enjoyed a final supper together with testimonials of what the week had meant to each one.

Day 10: Departure Day

As you might imagine, a mere description of the activities involved in this unique experience doesn't really begin to tell of the wonders of it all! What mattered most to the participants (both the guests and the hostesses) is a challenge to put into words – yet the closing evening was a rich sharing in creative poetry, storytelling and song, which gave vivid testimony to the value of this precious time. This included: the quality of the shared prayer; the touching moments of encounter with the variety of publics visited and

served; the delightful bantering; the in-depth one-to-ones that happened around the edges; the eye-opening personal realizations; the quiet times spent journaling; the avid picture-taking as they tried to capture each new moment in order to savor it; the surprising depth of sharing among “strangers”; the joyous laughter and the heartfelt tears; and the awakening to new possibilities of what “community” is all about. Those were the special gifts and genuine graces of our time together.

May the Divine Presence keenly felt throughout all of this continue to germinate and bear fruit in the ongoing sharing, as it ripples outward, and in the personal pondering that is sinking deeper into the heart of each participant in a way that “makes a difference” for the entire Community!



1. Sister Marg Kiefer, Sister Val Usher, Constanza Guzmán, Sister Carolina Pardo, and Gloria Gómez stand in the patio of the former site of the Colegio Santa Francisca Romana during its second year of existence (1964). 2. Bogotá Experience members serve a hot breakfast to some happy senior citizens of the Santa Francisca Romana Dispensary on the Colegio grounds. 3. The “Bogotá Sixteen” engaged in a significant sharing session in a reflection on “what community looks like.” 4. Teachers at the Day Care Center in Prado Pinzón offer their guests a lively taste of Colombian culture. 5. The artistic interior of “La Tercera” Church, the Third Order Franciscan church where Sister Carolina made her First Vows. 6. The mother and newest baby lamb of the Community. 7. The group visited several historic churches in the heart of the city.