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EMILY SHEPARD – VOLUNTEER, USA

My name is Emily Shepard and I started volunteering with Projects Abroad on April 1st. Back home in the United States, my job is involves assisting vulnerable populations and helping people who are in crisis. This means that I have an understanding of the many complex issues that create homelessness and feed into the aggressive cycle of poverty. However, learning about how homelessness is created in Argentinean culture is new to me. I am learning about how homelessness is viewed within society, the barriers to resources, and the organisations put in place to help – and of course, I am learning Spanish!

Working with the homeless population brings about its own unique set of challenges and obstacles to overcome. As a foreigner, in addition to the language barrier, there is an added layer of unfamiliarity with local customs and norms that poses an entirely different set of issues.

■ Ganas

The Law & Human Rights office is one of the few NGOs working to aid the homeless and we have partnered with Ganas, a reputable volunteer-run organisation that feeds and clothes the underprivileged in Cordoba. Ganas continues to be the primary NGO providing necessities to the homeless and we work with them to understand the legal issues facing this population.

Recently, our office has been re-evaluating how we go about approaching homeless people. Because we are one of the few institutions aiding the homeless, it would be easy to become complacent and to just feel proud of our good work. But we are constantly striving to improve and understand how we can provide better services to those in need.

Currently, our work at Ganas is split as we are trying to focus on two main objectives. Firstly, we survey any new attendees so that we can upload them into a database used by other offices. Secondly, we seek out new opportunities to open a legal case. That means digging a bit deeper into the issues of individuals and determining if these people need copies of their identification, a job, medical care, and so on.

Despite the difficulties, we are working diligently to improve the way we work with the homeless. We are working to educate our new volunteers more holistically about homelessness and ensuring that the people we aim to serve are receiving the most informed care possible. The changes in the office are exciting and mean that the work we do out of the office will be that much more effective. Challenging ourselves to do better is the key to making a change in the lives of the homeless population of Cordoba!

DONNA DOUVARTZIDIS – VOLUNTEER, AUSTRALIA



Violence workshop CECAM girls

I am in my final year of a double degree in Journalism and International Relations at university in South Australia and I wanted to undertake a human rights project overseas. I wanted to learn Spanish by immersion and I wanted a live-in experience that I would probably never have the opportunity to experience again. That is exactly what I got here in Cordoba, Argentina!

When I decided to undertake this programme with Projects Abroad, I wasn't sure what kind of human rights work I would be doing. The coverage of topics has been broad and I have had exposure to many varied activities.

During March and April, I worked with two girls' homes and a correctional facility, I started work on a new job programme and on human rights monitoring.

The girls' homes are QuisQui and Soaje. The young girls in these institutions have been taken from their homes, usually due to reported abuses, and will not be returning to what they knew to be home. The girls at QuisQui are 12-16 years old and they touched my heart the very first day I visited. One of the girls wrote a note to me on a paper heart that she had cut out, saying "I love you the most". The note is still by my bedside.

Our aim with these girls is to empower, educate and entertain them. I feel that we have achieved all three of these aims so far. I am particularly proud of our work with women's rights and empowerment. These girls are young but they are growing up quickly, so the activities need to be age appropriate whilst still aiming to expand their thinking.

■ Working at QuisQui



Cookies with QuisQui girls

Two main activities that stand out for me are the introduction of International Women's Day on March 8th and the visual dreams & goals boards that we did with the girls to encourage them to think beyond today.

On International Women's Day, we did several things. Firstly, we had a general discussion about what it is and what it means in the world today. We explained that there is still inequality in the world between men and women and in several countries girls do not even have the right to an education. Reminding these girls that they do have this opportunity and that they should use it to the best of their abilities was very important.

We then did an activity where the girls had to write down what they thought men could do that women couldn't. This was funny and empowering. I loved it when one girl would write something down and another would say... 'No, women can do that!'. This was an important realisation that women can do everything that men can do.

We wanted to reinforce that choice is paramount in their lives. Education is being offered to them, university is free in Argentina, they have a roof over their heads and they are

fed. Although they are emotionally vulnerable, if they can find the willpower within themselves, they can succeed in this life and follow their dreams, despite their current situation not being ideal.

We made them bookmarks to keep as a special memento, with the following words written on them: "Vos Podes Elegir", which means "You have a choice".

We watched the ["Like a Girl" campaign video](#) and we asked the girls what they thought it was about. We then explained that the term 'like a girl' is still being used as an insult in society and that they should be proud to be girls, not ashamed.

The second activity that stands out for me was the visual board idea. It is important for everyone to visualise their dreams and put them up somewhere where they can see them every day, as a reminder and as encouragement. If you do not have a goal to work towards, you just go through life with everyday routines and without a life purpose. I feel that a life purpose is vital for inner happiness, and that each person's purpose is different.

The girls chose coloured cardboard and a coloured folder to decorate and keep their special work in. We brought along pens, paints and special stencils from the office as a surprise, which was very exciting for the girls.

One girl wrote that her dreams were to study hard at school, to become an air hostess, to learn many languages and travel the world. She wrote that she dreamed to see her 21-year-old sister again because she loved her so much. She also had an alternate plan to work in the Argentinean military as an officer. Each dream that I read, my smile widened and tears welled in my eyes. It may be the simplest of things to write these thoughts down, but it may also have the deepest impact. I can only hope and pray that these seeds have been planted and that they eventually blossom.

We also tried to show the girls how to be polite. We explained to them that it is good manners to present the food on a plate and wait until everyone is at the table before eating. Some of the girls made sure that the table was set and other girls were keen to help prepare and clean up, which made me very happy.



Facemasks with CeCAM girls

■ Working at Soaje

Soaje, the other girls' institution, has slightly older girls who can be more challenging to work with. I only went to Soaje once, as my limited Spanish made it difficult to communicate with the girls, who need long-term counselling. There was a problem of bullying within the group that day, which was upsetting to see and was a reminder of how important the work at Soaje is.

■ Working at CeCAM (Centro Correccional para Adolescentes Mujeres)

CeCAM is a correctional facility for underage girls. I really love it here. I believe that these girls have learnt a lesson from being arrested, as they seem to have a sense of responsibility and they take ownership of their actions. The first time I went, we had fun playing cards, laughing and doing tricks.

The most important exercise we have done with the CeCAM girls is simply listening to their stories. I wanted to know why they were in the facility and what had got them to that point.

I hope that our work with the girls at QuisQui and CECAM has been as rewarding for them as it has for me.

■ The Job Programme

The job programme is a completely different type of project. This programme finds businesses that are willing to accept job applications from the homeless or those living in poverty.

Projects Abroad has been working with a volunteer organisation called 'Fundacion Ganas' for two years now. They deliver food to those in need and we visit them on a weekly basis. We use this time to gather information via surveys.

One of the questions on the survey asks if they are looking for work and what kind of work they are looking for. If they are looking, we list them as possible candidates for the job programme. All of this information is entered into a database in our office. It is also accessible to certain government organisations, as no information is currently collected by the government on the homeless population in Cordoba. This is extremely valuable information and we are looking at refining our collection process in order to obtain more detailed facts and achieve more consistency. We can then begin human rights monitoring, which requires stricter data collection in order to ensure accuracy.

For the job programme, we had to decide on which businesses would be suitable and potentially interested. Some businesses in Cordoba pay 'under the table', some below the minimum wage and some would simply not be suitable prospects for our candidates.

We began with a bakery chain and an ice-creamery. We contacted the heads of these organisations and to date, we have had one initial meeting which was very positive. The organisation is prepared to run free workshops for possible candidates and they are also interested in the idea of helping the local people. This sense of community spirit is very encouraging.

We have to make it very clear that we are not an employment agency, and that we are simply joining two sources together. The rest of the work, the application and interview etc., must be done by the candidate. We will assist with résumé writing should that be required and show people where they can access a computer or job information in the future.

I look forward to further meetings with this organisation and adding to our list of prospective employers in the near future.

■ Human Rights Monitoring

This is an enormous project and unfortunately, I will only have time to begin initial research. I hope that someone with similar interests and academic background can continue this for me in the future, as it is deeply needed in Cordoba.

Human rights monitoring entails collecting data through various means and collating it with the intention of supporting a conclusion or theory. The data must be derived from qualitative and quantitative sources, meaning written statements taken directly from people or on-the-ground assessment, together with statistical data collection.

This work can be complex and it is important to think outside of the box. For example, you may be researching causes of health problems for people living in sub-standard homes. You may need to look at what flooring is common in these homes. You could speak with nutritionists or to the local council. You may need to speak to town planning in relation to infrastructure or you may need to speak to rental agencies, to see their statistics and how they have changed over a period of time.

A framework for this process needs to be created and I am currently at the beginning of this process. The United Nations has some information on processes and procedures and I am currently reading about a monitoring project in Africa. Once a general framework has been established, it can be applied to many scenarios. This is our goal for the human rights monitoring project.

I look forward to staying in contact with the Projects Abroad Argentinian office to see how this monitoring develops over the years.

JULIETTE GILMAS – VOLUNTEER, FRANCE

My name is Juliette and I am a French volunteer in Argentina. My main work is with legal cases, because I am studying law and I can understand Spanish. This placement comprises of working with lawyers and helping them to solve many different cases.

■ Legal Cases

The legal cases I have been working on come from all over because in Argentina, lots of people need legal advice. Nevertheless, most of cases you will have to work on will come from Ganas and Villa la Tela (the legal clinic).

The first part of my job was to study the cases that were given to me and to upload them onto the office's database, with information on whether they needed legal help from us or not. The cases are varied, from family problems to property and land. The most difficult part is knowing that you can't help everyone. This leads us to the second part of the work: determining who you can help and how you can help them.

I have been working on organising the legal advice offer into different categories. The one I know best is the 'pensions' category. I chose this category because a lot of cases I had to work on were about getting the AUH (Asignacion Universal por Hijo), a pension for poor families who have children. We are trying to develop an AUH instructive, with the goal of providing clear and quick information to the people who need it.

Another important part of the legal cases work is to look after the people you are helping where possible. For the duration of the trial, you will take them to their appointments if necessary and provide them with a phone, bus card or anything they may need in case of an emergency.

Working as a lawyer in Argentina, you always have to move forward and try not to look back, even when there are some failures. There will always be people in need of legal help.