

Friends of Colombia



Newsletter of the Colombia Returned Peace Corps Volunteers

P.O. Box 15292 • Chevy Chase, MD 20825

Volume 21, Number 1

April 2007

Letter from the President

Dear Friends of Colombia,

I am very pleased to report that our December newsletter generated a significant growth in membership. We have received membership dues from 20 and due to the efforts of Group One, our number of lifetime members has significantly increased. Thanks, Ned, for reconnecting with Group One.

You will see from the Treasurer's Report on page 6 that our donations have more than doubled for 2006. We donated to two more projects; K-12 Wired, Maureen Orth's project in the school she started outside of Medellín as a volunteer, and Colombia Progresiva, which provides school children with clothes and school supplies needed to attend school.

Ambassador from Colombia Carolina Barco met with Ned Chalker and me after the reception held at the Embassy honoring the 45th anniversary of the Peace Corps. She told us that she has fond memories of the Peace Corps in Colombia and would like to work with us to make it possible for RPCVs to visit and reconnect with Colombia. Her letter is printed in this newsletter.

We have begun working with the Embassy to formulate such a plan. Thanks to the effort of Maureen Orth, the Cafeteros are interested in collaborating with us to make a reunion possible. Initially we are aiming for February 2008 for a four to five day event in Cartagena, which would include country updates, planned activities, and plenty of free time. Some people may wish to visit their PC sites following the reunion. We are in the very early stages of planning and much can change. However, I need to know if you would like to receive information as it develops and if you think you might like to attend. We hope to have at least 50 people express an interest to make it worth the effort so, if you are interested, please send me an e-mail at arlches@aol.com with the subject CARTAGENA.

In keeping with our renewed direction toward People to People, Making a Difference in Colombia, you will be receiving a fundraising letter in July, marking El Veinte de Julio, Colombia Independence Day. Please watch for it and we hope you will remain committed to our friends in Colombia.

This newsletter is the product of our new editor, Abby Wasserman, whom we're very pleased to have working with us.

Here on the east coast, Spring is in the air.

Arleen Stewart Cheston
President, Friends of Colombia



The annual silleteros parade in Medellín photographed by José Castañeda, whose three-part story of an extraordinary encounter with Peace Corps volunteers, "The Flower Parade," begins in this issue.

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EMBASSY OF COLOMBIA, WASHINGTON DC

E- 052.

January 9, 2007

Mrs.
Arleen Cheston
President
FRIENDS OF COLOMBIA
Washington, D.C.

Dear Arlene:

I would like to begin by wishing you and all the members of Friends of Colombia a wonderful new year, and the greatest success in 2007. It was a joy to spend time with you and all of the members of your organization, and to witness how vividly you have remembered, and kept in your hearts, the experiences lived in Colombia. It is so gratifying to find that your relationship with Colombia is not only a memory, but has evolved into the many productive and necessary programs on behalf of our different communities. You remain true Peace Corps members in every sense of the word.

We had spoken about different ways in which the Embassy and Friends of Colombia could continue to explore different avenues of collaboration, to hopefully increase your participation in social development programs. I am interested in continuing these conversations, and look forward to meeting with you in the near future to discuss this topic.

In particular, I am interested in working together to open the door for the former Peace Corps volunteers to return to my country, reconnect with old friends, have the opportunity to learn about the new developments in rural and urban Colombia, and to hopefully open new dialogue for future programs and activities. It would also be a wonderful opportunity to visit the beautiful Cartagena de Indias, and enjoy the beauty and bounty of Caribbean Colombia.

We look forward to your feedback about this subject, and are ready to begin to coordinate this visit, develop a joint agenda for conferences, day trips and workshops, and do everything possible to make this trip a success. Please do not hesitate to contact me in the early part of 2007, so that we can begin to plan this new activity.

Best wishes and warm regards.

Caroline Barco

CAROLINA BARCO
EMBAJADORA

Cafeteros Invite RPCVs to Serve Once More

The city of Medellín, the Universidad Pedagógica of Tunja and the Federation of Coffee Growers of Caldas are all interested in having former Colombian Peace Corps volunteers return to Colombia to serve again.

Maureen Orth (1964-66 Medellín) recently spent 10 days in Colombia meeting with officials there to explore the possibility of having former volunteers return to Colombia for three weeks, three months, or more.

Mayor Sergio Fajardo of Medellín, who has invested 40% of the city's budget in education, is eager for former volunteers with experience teaching English as a second language to train Colombian teachers in Medellín's new Centro de Idiomas slated to open next November. "We haven't yet figured out a good way to train teachers," he said. "We would welcome former volunteers to help us."

The coffee growers, the country's largest non-governmental agency, wants RPCVs in Manizales and Pereira to train school administrators in management, assist at virtual learning centers where campesinos learn how to use the computer, and help design the most effective curriculum in these centers. Other programs in health and small business also are being studied. In addition, Escuelas Nuevas, a successful rural teaching program in Latin America, also would like to collaborate on an English-teaching curriculum. All of these programs would be administered in-country by NGOs and educational institutions with excellent track records.

The plan taking shape envisions that housing and a stipend would be provided. Those able to pay their own transportation would be encouraged to do so, and others could be funded. Former volunteer Jack Whelan, who returned to teach last October at the university in Tunja, reports that one can live simply but comfortably on \$800 a month or less. He is the impetus behind a pilot program of student teachers who are being sent to Escuela Marina Orth in rural Medellín, another institution that would welcome RPCVs.

Any former Colombia volunteer interested in serving again should contact Maureen Orth at morth@k12wired.com.

Says Orth, "The possibilities to help are vast. Colombia is much safer now and there is a palpable sense that the country is on the move."

Colombia's Indigenous People

"Colombia's Indigenous Peoples: Organizing for Peace," exploring the effects war has had on native peoples in Colombia, took place on March 21, 2007, at the National Museum of the American Indian (NMAI), Smithsonian Institution. Featured speakers were Lisardo Domicó, General Secretary, National Indigenous Organization of Colombia, and Alcibiades Escue Miscue, Human Rights Coordinator, Association of Indigenous Townships of Northern Cauca. The following was written by the program's organizers.

There are some 90 indigenous peoples in Colombia who speak 64 different languages. Yet these indigenous peoples face a humanitarian crisis. At least 12 indigenous nations are on the brink of extinction due to the ongoing internal armed conflict, which has provoked massive internal displacement and the confinement of rural communities. The speakers highlighted the unique rights these communities have under Colombian and international law; challenges to the practical application and defense of these rights; and indigenous organizations and their proposals for the protection of rights to autonomy, life, territory, and culture.

Since its creation in 1994, Association of Indigenous Townships of Northern Cauca (ACIN) has won multiple awards for its work, including Colombia's National Peace Prize and the United Nations Equatorial Prize for best sustainable development project in the world. This year, the American Friends Service Committee nominated this outstanding organization to the Nobel Peace Prize for its commitment to non-violent methods in the midst of the 50-year-old conflict. ACIN encompasses 14 Indigenous reserves from the northern state of Cauca. ACIN is also well known for the Indigenous Guard, which has won critical acclaim for its mediation tactics and peaceful approach to the conflict.

This year the National Indigenous Organization of Colombia (ONIC) celebrates 25 years representing the different indigenous peoples of Colombia and organizing for the successful defense of their rights to life, territory, and culture based on the principles of unity, land, culture and autonomy. ONIC has helped to raise the profile of Colombia's vibrant indigenous movement both at the national and international level, most recently by hosting an international verification mission to visit indigenous communities in five regions of the country, by building and liaising with a Support Network in Latin America, Europe and North America, and by carrying out advocacy and awareness-raising tours in those countries.

The Flower Parade

By José Castañeda

José Castañeda, a native Colombian who practices law in upstate New York, has waited to tell this story for many years. Due to length, it will appear in three parts. Set in Medellín, it tells about the profound consequences chance meetings may have. Contact José at jcjurist@aol.com.

Part One: The Splendors of Medellín

As I opened my window for a whiff of morning air, the sounds of the city waking up flooded my room. The church bells, the whirs of early traffic, and what I had missed the most, the relentless crowing of the roosters. It was dark, I couldn't see them, but I leaned out the window and trained my ears at the source of the excitement. I first distinguished a twitter and a hoot, then the heavy thump of wings. The deep chants of senior roosters rapidly followed, but they soon were overtaken by younger clucks of lesser status. A string of loud calls crisscrossed one another, some arriving in full strength, others as faint *chirrs* after traveling long distances. In the midst of the commotion, a clear-throat, baritone rooster tried to flaunt his prowess at the coop, but his chant was drowned out by the deafening replies of his neighbors. An impressive pandemonium quickly ensued, until all the calls from all the roosters floated freely in my ears in nostalgic serenade.

This was Medellín, Colombia's celebrated "City of Eternal Spring." At that hour the horizon was no more than a pink rod floating on darkness, and the city a dormant mass of shadows. I distinguished a few people scurrying past the hotel doors five floors below. I had to join them soon if I wanted a good viewing spot for the parade. But it wasn't easy for me to move quickly at that hour. Not after a long flight from New York the day before, and a cheerful celebration of my first night in Colombia in several years. Still, the thought of what the day would bring conquered my lethargy. I donned some loose clothes and running shoes, threw a few water bottles in my knapsack, and off I went the shortest way I knew downtown.

I was not even a full block from my hotel when I saw a group of people sleeping on the sidewalk, their bodies shielded from the night cold by a heap of tattered blankets and old sweaters. From the ex-

posed wrist of a young child hung a loose string that collared the neck of a fast-chewing mountain rabbit still in its fluffy baby coat. Standing next to them was a young woman with a boy of about 12. His heavy eyes confirmed he'd been pulled from deep sleep. The two of them were tending to a decrepit wooden crate that held a stack of paper cups, a bag full of wet oranges, and a dull plastic squeezer.

"Orange juice?" the woman asked.

"One cup," I said, stopping short.

She split several oranges with a knife, pressed them hard against the juicer, and collected the liquid that spurted through her fingers into an empty paper cup.

"Is that your family?" I asked.

"Yes. We lost our farm and all we had. We come from the north coast."

She looked into the darkness for a moment. "They came shooting from the far side of our farm and we just had time to run away. My boy wouldn't leave without his baby rabbit, so we had to bring him too."

The juice had the bitter tang of unripe fruit, but I wasn't about to complain. In my own childhood in Colombia, I plucked mangos and guavas from their trees before they had matured to full sweetness. A gift from nature was still a gift, I learned early, even if not yet fully ripe. I placed the empty cup over the crate while I pondered my duty to help this homeless family. A large tip? A gift for clothes and blankets? The first wouldn't do justice, I concluded, no matter how incongruous with the pittance she charged for the juice. The latter wouldn't solve their problem at its root. I paid her with loose change, wished them luck and walked away. With the sun now falling on the city, I picked a perfect spot alongside La Playa Avenue. Next to me, scores of youngsters, couples, entire families, began to stake a claim on patches of sidewalk that they prepared to defend like their own property. Soon the whole length of the avenue was packed, and the air thickened with the sounds of joyful crowds. Between the chanting and the clapping, and the laughter and the jostling, I craned my neck for signs of the parade.

Suddenly, a giant flock of screeching green-and-yellow parakeets filled the sky, and the people

around me rushed for cover as if a heavy downpour had broken loose. They shadowed the sun like leaves in a wind storm, making sharp, synchronized turns, plunging, diving, whirling, leaving behind a trail of floating feathers. They continued to swoop and pivot in mid-air until they settled on a giant mango tree. Once there, they added their loud chatter to the clamor of the assembled crowd below.

The birds' pirouettes served as a preamble to that day's *silletteros* parade, an event that recalled colonial days when peasants from the hills of Santa Elena descended on the city with chair-like contraptions on their backs, known as *silletas*, overflowing with fresh flowers. These journeys to the market led to annual celebrations so colorful and fresh that they are said to instill a poetic view of life in those who watch them. Only Santa Elena's native sons and daughters have the right to be in the parade, and they take pride in maintaining the spirit of the region.

A little over a decade ago Medellín was still in the grip of outlaw groups, suffering from a continuous wave of crime and shootings. Today, under more peaceful circumstances, the same city prepared to show the beauty of its flowers and the jovial nature of its people. The hovering smog that stung the eyes during work days now yielded to a contagious mood of carnival: clapping, laughter, vendors shouting out their fares, accordions humming songs with hip-swing rhythms, girls in peek-a-boo skirts of dazzling colors, dogs looking for morsels, and everywhere, the pervasive scents of homespun recipes.

As the sun grew hotter on my head, I caught the smell of fresh *buñuelos*, the cheese-filled fritters best known as the treat of festive days. I was about to leave my spot to sample them when a loud roar of voices announced the start of the parade.

Marching slowly at the head of the first group was a graceful woman in her early senior years. A wide-brimmed hat gave her shelter from the sun, while a pair of jute sandals allowed her to walk with measured aplomb. Her provincial dress—crisp white with red embroidery—made her look like a member of a country doll collection. She came within a few feet from where I stood, wiped her face with a small handkerchief, and with the poise of a gracious hostess turned around for us to enjoy a full view of her creation.

It was a stunning work of art. At the center of the arrangement she had woven a golden cushion of saw grass with arching, fluffy spigots that resembled the chest of an African plains lion. The saw grass was surrounded by a narrow band of pansies that copied in their petals the patterns of exotic butterflies. They, in turn, guided my eyes to a tapestry of violets and daisies matted with the skill of an old master.

More *silletas* followed, some carried by men with trimmed mustaches, others by stern-faced family matriarchs, and still others by young children. In every display the sum appeared greater than the parts: in the brightness of yellow daffodils; in the purity of calla lilies and carnations; in the serenity of mimosas and petunias. I struggled to relish each design before they moved along to be replaced by new ones.

Years earlier, with the murder of Jorge Eliécer Gaitán, the most revered caudillo in Colombia's modern history, the country had descended into an abyss of mayhem and injustice. Armed groups appeared on both sides of the political divide, setting off a decade of bloodshed known since then as *La Violencia*. The experience was as horrid as it was ultimately senseless: conservatives (the blues) and liberals (the reds) were massacring each other for no apparent reason. Men and women who had lived on good terms for generations were transformed into enemies without cause or provocation. In the mountains and the valleys, in the towns and in the villages, the blues killed the reds and the reds killed the blues without debating goals or ideology. There was also little choice on affiliation: people were born into one party or the other. In time, a person's political alignment became a fighting word that could lead to certain death. When confronted by armed bandits, only those who quickly claimed membership in the party of the group attacking them had some chance of surviving. My own father guessed right several times, but many from his region guessed wrong and ended up as fodder for the vultures.

In the face of armed attacks from various groups, my parents were forced to flee their home in an adjacent mountain region. The abundance of the fields was soon replaced by deprivation in the city. When I turned 15 I had to quit school to work in a gold mine, a trying experience for men of any age. Low-flying bats buzzed over my head as I marched into the caves every day. Water from cavernous ceilings

constantly dripped on my shoulders. At night, my mother poured wax from burning candles over the open blisters that resulted as I traded pen and pencils for pick and shovels and wheelbarrows. Yet, the silence of the mountain drove me closer to the one refuge still within my reach: my thoughts. While I chiseled the rock day after day my thoughts became my own redemption, for they constantly brought back words my mother had often repeated in my childhood: "Only education will some day lead to success."

After a year of work in the gold mine, I returned to my native city of Ibagué hoping to start on my ninth grade. All secondary schools charged tuition at that time, and financial aid was non-existent. With the first day of classes fast approaching, I decided to ask for help from private individuals, but the prospect that strangers would heed the calls of a shy, bony teenager seemed nil. The stream of hope I had with me when I came down from the mountain soon dwindled to a trickle, and I began to resign myself to the idea of going back to the gold mine. That changed when, in a moment of extraordinary fortune, I met a young man from Fremont, Ohio, who had recently traveled to Ibagué to serve as a Peace Corps volunteer.

End of Part One

Have an item or suggestions for the FOC newsletter? Send by email to abby@abbywasserman.com

Friends of Colombia Treasurer's Report, 2005-2006

Friends of Colombia donations to projects in Colombia more than doubled in 2006. Newsletter expenses were higher because we used color in the printing and the December newsletter was mailed to the entire mailing list (more than 2,000) in an effort to bring the list up to date. Responses to the December newsletter have increased the balance on hand in the checking account to \$13,000 plus.

-Jim Kolb, Treasurer

	2005	2006
REVENUES		
Direct dues	3870.00	4907.50
Dues through NPCA	1948.33	1386.58
Total dues	5818.33	6294.08
Donations to FOC	4747.56	1711.56
Event income	1276.00	560.00
Interest (checking)	16.02	
Interest (Calvert notes)	205.47	103.45
TOTAL REVENUE	12063.38	8669.09
EXPENDITURES		
Donations by FOC	4950.00	10600.00
Event expense	770.31	737.43
Wire transfer fees	15.00	50.00
Newsletters	2639.66	6703.93
Website		574.99
NPCA affiliation	178.00	90.00
USPS permit	220.00	320.00
TOTAL EXPENDITURES	8772.97	19076.35
ASSETS (as of 12/31):		
Checking acct	15162.24	6248.38
Calvert Foundation notes	10205.47	10205.45
TOTAL ASSETS	25367.71	16453.83

FOC Donation Buys Books for Health Workers

Elizabeth Jenkins-Joffe reports that a \$250 donation from Friends of Colombia has been spent at Hesperian's Gratis Book Fund. Books were sent to Curt Wands, a Quaker with Concern America who trains local people as health care workers for their villages in the remote and mountainous northwest area Chocó. They are from 32 different communities, speaking Wauunan, Emberá, and the Chocó version of Spanish. They are Indigenous, Afro-Colombian and Mestizo, women and men. In addition to issues of poverty, the region is torn between the national government's army, paramilitary groups of varying allegiances, insurgents against the government, and armies of the drug lords. The Gratis Book Fund (GBF) provided Curt's trainees with nine copies of *Dónde no hay doctor*, three of *Dónde no hay dentista*, and one of *El niño campesino deshabilitado* to distribute to his health promoters. They also included pamphlets excerpted from their soon-to-be published books on environmental health: *Sanitation and Cleanliness* (three copies) and *Water for Life* (25 copies)—all in Spanish versions. Without FOC's donation, GBF would not have been able to provide these sorely needed materials.

¡Viva la Piña! A Community Development Story

By Ron Burkard

In 1965 I became regional director for the CARE-managed Acción Comunal Peace Corps program in Colombia, moving from Guadalajara, Mexico to Barranquilla. The wonderful area I covered was the then-departamentos of La Guajira, Magdalena, Atlántico, Bolívar and Córdoba. There were about 50 urban and rural volunteers in the region at the time. Several of them are still friends, more than 40 years later! CARE's contract with the Peace Corps ended on short notice when I had been in Barranquilla for less than a year. This was one of the shortest but most meaningful of 17 assignments during my 33 years with CARE.

During those short nine months living on Colombia's north coast that I learned basic principles of community development that served me well in my future career.

One story highlights those principles and the approach to working with communities used by CARE and the Peace Corps in those exciting early years.

Somewhere in Colombia there is a community (whose name and location now escape me) whose top priority was to build a monument to *La Piña* (the pineapple).

Community development PCVs were assigned to rural communities and marginalized urban areas to work with Juntas de Acción Comunal, where they were to help organize, prioritize needs and move towards solving problems hindering development. The "usual suspects" were health, schools, clean water, access roads and income.

In this instance, the PCV was disheartened to learn that community leaders wanted to build a monument to *La Piña* in the town plaza. "What's wrong with these people?" he wondered.

Well, it turned out that the area's economy had recently been transformed after the cultivation of pineapples began a few years before. The community wanted to acknowledge the importance of the changes *La Piña* had brought.

After being encouraged to "go with the flow" the PCV (at first reluctantly) helped the community move forward with fund-raising activities—raffles, dances, etc. All this required a great deal of organization. At long last the monument was completed and appropriately inaugurated with a joyous fiesta.

This success built confidence in a community

previously not used to working together. It was followed by construction of a school, health center and other activities.

Lesson learned: Let the people lead—they know best! This basic principle served me well in future CARE assignments throughout Latin America, South Asia and in South Africa.

When I joined World Neighbors as its executive director in 1997, it came as no surprise to learn that this approach had been key to the organization's philosophy since its founding in 1951, and that WN's founder John L. Peters was one of the community development experts the Peace Corps looked to for guidance in its formative years.

¡Viva la Piña!

Ron Burkard joined CARE in 1963, serving abroad in México, Colombia, Nicaragua, Ecuador, Perú, Bolivia, India, Bangladesh and South Africa. Contact him at ronpaul@cox.net.

Remembering Eliseo Carrasco

We heard recently from his son, Jerome, that Eliseo Carrasco, the contract overseas representative in Bogotá for Colombia Peace Corps Physical Education/Sports Program from 1962 to 1967, died of old age on August 15, 2005 in El Paso, Texas. He was also the Peace Corps Country Director in Panamá, Dominican Republic and Chile during the 1970s. FOC member Jerry Norris remembers Eliseo as "one of the great and caring Peace Corps associate directors."

Contact Jerome Carrasco at 949-830-9970.

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On January 13, 2007 the Magdalena Foundation presented its 2007 scholarships to 26 students. The scholars appear in the picture along with children of the Paso a Paso program, and recipients of the Colombia Project micro-enterprise loans. These programs, administered by FUNDEHUMAC, a local NGO in Santa Marta, are supported in part by Friends of Colombia. FUNDEHUMAC President Alba Lucia Varela and Haroldo Suarez, President of the Magdalena Foundation, also appear in the picture. Go to www.magdalenafoundation.org and www.fundehumac.org to see more pictures and reports on the activities of both.