

October 31, 2007

I continue to be in love with Colombia. Sometimes the sights and sounds of Bucaramanga bring back memories of India – the traffic and the drivers and pedestrians’ disregard for rules. Even the houses crowded together in the poorer areas resemble their counterparts in Nangloi, where I worked in India. At times “Vallenato”, a style of popular Colombian folk music, has a similar sound to Indian film music. And of course, the noise – it is always noisy here: people speak loudly, like to talk, and always like to have background music (making conversation difficult), the streets are narrow and there is a lot of traffic. And it has a friendly feeling about it all. People are comfortable with and tolerant of each other.

On October 10 Marlene and I went to ASODISPIE, an association established by disabled people in a city about half an hour from Bucaramanga called Piedecuesta. We attended their celebration of “Dia Blanco” or Day of the Disabled along with about 50 people who ranged from infants to seniors, with all kinds of disabilities, and their families. Again, I am struck by how integrated these families are - toddlers holding hands with their aunt or uncle who has a disability; youngsters sitting beside their disabled siblings and feeding them; little children with and without disability running around and playing together; children and adults with and without disability performing folk dances together; people with disabilities performing their “party-piece” in a very accepting and open environment.



Children with Down syndrome danced for us. The shoes on the table in the back were made by people in ASODISPIE.



This folk dance is an example of the integrated activity.



The crowd enjoys entertainment brought by family members during disability day.



This girl is beautifully decked out for the Halloween party held on Oct 31.

ASODISPIE provides a place where people of all ages with disabilities can participate in various activities such as physical and occupational therapy, painting, dancing and chocolate making. They are also starting to construct wheelchairs.



Construction of wheelchairs has been a long term dream. To date they have purchased a drill and a soldering machine.



This device is given this boy something he has wanted for years – the chance to walk. It was designed and donated by two Colombian Canadians.

Through CAPD, ASODISPIE is involved in a project led by the World Health Organization and an Italian Disability Organization called AIFO. The aim of the project is to promote self care amongst their members. This year the participants are receiving training sessions by health care professionals on topics they listed as important to them. The project is in its second year and in November Marlene and Chantel, a Canadian from Quebec, will be doing a participatory evaluation with the participants. I will have the opportunity to be trained as a facilitator of the evaluation as well as others from the association.

These pictures were taken during the training session in self care with the Down syndrome group.



A speech therapist demonstrates an exercise while the mother watches.



An older brother practices the exercises under supervision of the therapist.

I have been reflecting on the difference between working with people with disabilities here and in Canada. Yesterday, a woman told us that she admired the work that was done in Canada for disabled people in terms of funding, services, etc. It is true, but what we miss is the integration that I see happening in FANDIC and ASODISPIE. Because of the services we have in Canada, the children with disabilities are left more in the hands of professionals, and the family has less involvement in their training. Interestingly, I have seen fewer behavioral problems with the children and adults with disabilities, particularly aggressive and risk behaviors. Perhaps this is because most people with disabilities remain in their family setting. Or it may be due to the cultural expectation that children and young people be polite and respectful towards adults. In any case, these are my observations.



This backdrop was painted by disabled children for the skit, "Old MacDonald had a farm".



The animals of the farm include a donkey, cow, cat and rooster. The costumes were made by the participants.