

## Finding Asuncion's Most Vulnerable Kids

Last week I told you about a Vacation Camp being run through Viva's network of projects and churches in Asuncion, Paraguay. At the beginning of the week it was so cold that the kids weren't leaving their homes, and we had fewer campers than we'd expected. But our teenaged volunteers from two local projects - a day centre for youth suffering the effects of HIV/AIDS and a care home - braved the chilly streets and invited local kids to come join us for the rest of the week. On Monday we had 30 children. By Thursday we had more than 100 children and 40 teenagers!



On the surface, the goal of Vacation Camp was to warm up the local children during the week's winter holiday, and give them something to do. In the impoverished neighbourhoods where our network of projects and churches operate, many homes don't have heating. Even if they did, the parents can't afford enough fuel to keep the house warm all day. On top of that, parents have to work every day just to feed and house their children, and paying for day care is out of the question. Hundreds of children spend their holidays sitting in a freezing house, bored, unable to go out because the streets are so dangerous.



This goal we did achieve! As you may have read, it was a week of sports training, football games, entertainment, arts and crafts, dancing, and tasty hot snacks. The kids had a blast, their parents didn't have to worry about them, and everyone made new friends.



Our underlying mission was to get these vulnerable children in touch with members of our network. This year the projects, churches and organisations that make up Viva's Paraguay network are making a concerted effort to reach all the children in the neighbourhoods where we work. We can offer so much help, with many projects specialising in different things like caring for street children, specialised daycare for children of single parents making job opportunities possible, offering quality education for children who would otherwise not have the chance, providing care for kids and adults with HIV/AIDS, and offering meals and places to sleep for children who flee abusive homes. But how can we help them if they don't know who we are?



Vacation Camp was the perfect way to get to know the kids, to build their trust and show them that when they have problems they can turn to us instead of to drugs or the streets. Now more than 275 children under 12 and 40 teenagers have had a great time with us for a week; what better way is there to build relationships? It was also an opportunity for the projects and churches to work on their co-operation skills. The stronger a network is, the more good it can do for the children in its community. With better knowledge of what the other members do, each project or church can easily help a child find services to meet his or her needs.



Excitingly, we had kids from as far away as Canada get involved in Vacation Camps. 12-year-old Natalie visited Paraguay with her family two years ago and decided to spring to action to help the disadvantaged children she met here - "It really got me excited that I could help out and make this world poverty free!" Teaming up with a friend she wrote poems that inspired her classmates to join the cause,

and together they made and sold jewellery, cards and bags in their school. By the end of the year, after much hard work and entrepreneurship, they'd raised \$400 to send to Vacation Camps! "It's all worth it to know that people have smiles on their faces because of us," exclaims Natalie. And smiles there certainly were - and will be for a long time, thanks to the relationships her generous donation has helped us form with Asuncion's most vulnerable children.



One volunteer, a 14 year old boy from the children's home, was the first to sign up as a volunteer for last year's Viva Christmas Party. This year once again he was first in line to volunteer at Vacation Camp. He received every word of the volunteer training our Protection Programme staff offered. He arrived every day with fresh energy and excitement, a tremendous help and encouragement to the Sports Trainers, thanking staff with a big hug and saying, "I have grown so

much inside, I will never forget this, we will continue with this!" And this is a boy who comes from a situation of abuse and neglect himself. This story is similar to many more, both from teenaged kids from the care home, the HIV centre, the local churches. They bonded and had so much fun together, in doing activities with the younger kids! Many were touched by the difficult lives these children live, and yet how they could play and laugh so freely during this week.



Sometimes adults despair that the next generation is going awry, spending all its time online and its money on celebrity magazines. But what we've seen is dozens of amazing teenagers excited to get involved in improving their community, forgetting their own problems for a while; and a school-full of teenagers half the world away excited about giving nearly 300 kids a good time and new hope for the future.

~ Anja, Network Director for Viva in Paraguay

for more info:

<http://viva-togetherforchildren.blogspot.com/>  
[www.redvivaparaguay.org](http://www.redvivaparaguay.org)

