

Thursday, 22 July 2010

Warming Up in Paraguay

All this week dozens of more vulnerable children in Paraguay are having the time of their life, while at the same time building life-saving relationships with projects and churches that want to help them ... thanks to the power of working together! We're calling it "Colonia de Vacaciones", or Vacation Camp.



It all started last Christmas when Red Viva Paraguay ('Red' means 'network' in Spanish) threw Viva Christmas Parties for almost 1500 children in several central neighbourhoods of Asunción, Paraguay. These Christmas Parties are a great way to introduce kids to projects that want to help them, and for projects in our Paraguay network to get used to working together. Throwing Christmas Parties for hundreds of more vulnerable kids takes a lot of teamwork!

The parties were such a success that the participating projects decided to keep holding community outreach activities throughout the year, so that we can get to know the children of our neighbourhoods and build up strong relationships with them. That way when they have problems at home or need other kinds of help, they'll trust us to help them instead of turning to the streets or to drugs.

Viva's World Weekend of Prayer back in June really helped us kick things off, as more projects and churches wanted to see continued outreach. So we formed a working group to come up with strategies to reach vulnerable children. The first proposal was for Vacation Camp, and we went for it. When a phys-ed teacher, contact of Red Viva Paraguay, offered to come out from Germany to aid in sports training, and a group of young teen girls in Canada work to raise support for a project such as this, we were ready to kick off!

The five local projects (members of Red Viva Paraguay) and seven actively supporting churches in their surroundings are working together to bring Vacation Camp to the kids of Asuncion, Paraguay's capital and largest city. We started in June by meeting every week to co-ordinate the event and, despite little bumps along the way, the burden of work - and fundraising! - was shared among everyone. If you've ever tried working with a group of diverse people from different organisations you'll know that's hard to do! Red Viva also provided training for all the volunteers who would run Vacation Camp. Especially important is teaching these volunteers how to identify signs of abuse that children might show, so that we can get help for them immediately.

One of the most exciting things for me has been seeing teenagers from twp of the projects, a care home for children and youth, and a day centre for kids affected with HIV AIDS, involved in Vacation Camp. If you know teenagers, you know they often want to do their own thing. But we have more than 30 amazing teenagers helping as volunteers with the younger kids! They have a leading role in organising the events, and also they're on the front line, interacting with the kids. Even more importantly, these teenagers attended Red Viva's training and learned to look out for abuse ... a skill they'll be able to use whenever they meet new friends in their neighbourhoods.

Unfortunately we had a bout of cold weather this week – it's winter here in beautiful South America – so not as many kids came out as we were hoping for. Vacation Camp was originally supposed to be held in a park in central Asuncion, but we were able to move quickly into a sports hall on the property of a children's home – a member of Red Viva Paraguay, of course! Working together as a network has made all the difference in bringing an exciting camp to these more vulnerable kids.

On Monday and Tuesday our volunteers braved the cold to pull off a variety of activities designed to help kids warm up. Children from age six right through the teenagers had sports training, played football, learned to dance choreography and expressed creativity with arts & crafts, ate a delicious hot snack, and learned about the love of Jesus through a dramatic show from a team of evangelistic performers including clowns. (No party in South America is complete without clowns!)

For the rest of the week, our volunteers, both adults and teens, are going to walk through the neighbourhoods around Vacation Camp looking for more street kids to invite. We don't want any child to miss the chance to meet people who love them and hear the gospel! We're hoping to forge close relationships with more children from this community, and their families, to bring them closer to churches in their area and get them as much help as we can offer. Which is a lot, since there is such a variety of organisations in Viva's Paraguay network, such as Daycare Centers, Community Schools, Day Centres and Community Kitchens, Homes and more, and churches offering a variety of programmes for kids.

The response from the staff and volunteers of all the projects and churches making Vacation Camp possible is very positive. They can't wait to do more community outreach camps like this soon, when the weather warms up and more kids will come out! Here at the network we're just so excited to see local projects and churches really working together to reach out to more children at risk. Watch this space to see what we come up with next!

Anja, Network Director for Viva in Paraguay

Find out more what we are doing:

www.latinamerica.viva.org / www.redvivaparaguay.org

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