

PROJECTS ABROAD ARGENTINA

LAW & HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT



Volunteers and Lalo visiting the Former Detention Center La Perla.



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VOLUNTEER STORIES

GRANT SIMENS

There's a gap between people. It shows itself in a number of ways. From the problems being faced halfway across the world, to the private issues in the house next door; the gap between humans can separate you from taking on the challenges and problems of others. This trip, I found that was no longer the case for me.



Legal Clinic at Blas Pascal's Community Center

I spent the last six weeks in Cordoba, Argentina working at the Human Rights Office. New to volunteering in general, let alone human rights, I didn't know what to expect. All I knew is that two things are true. 1. I love meeting new people and cultures and 2. I wanted to have a positive impact in a community. I would soon come to realize, my experience would not only do that, but far exceed my expectations in how much I've seem to grow as a person since I arrived.

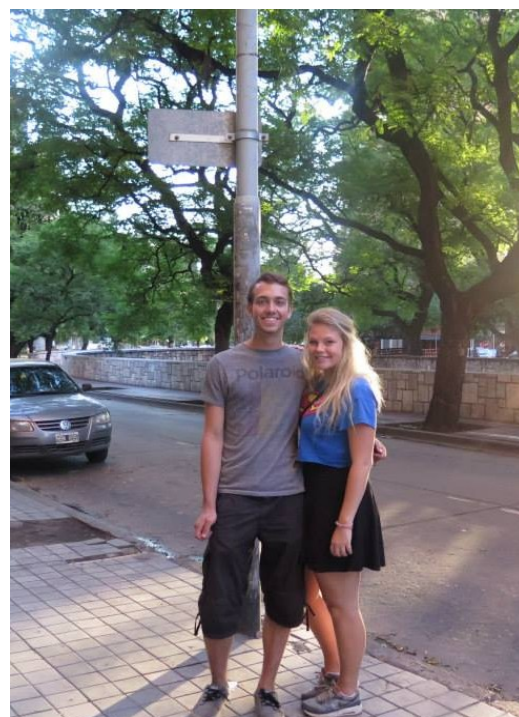
Working in an office may have been the headquarters of our operations, but I soon found the real growth came from the work we brought with us when we left to go to our different placements around the city. My work entailed a variety of tasks. As a human rights group, it was our duty to acquire and follow-up on human rights cases to help in the best way we can legally. This meant for me, helping out at the Legal Clinic at Blas Pascal, and interviewing and interacting with the homeless people at Plaza San Martin.

Cases were probably my favorite thing about the work. Being able to find and interact with people who need our help, and follow-up with them throughout the process of their case, really allowed me to care and try to help the specific people I've been tasked with helping. It allowed me to take on their problems as well and put a face to the paperwork we did behind doors. One often hears statistics about the poor and homeless, but for many people those problems feel far from home. So as a volunteer, starting out with a name on a sheet of paper, then moving on to face-to-face contact, and seeing progress being made, really helped that gap close for me. It let me be a part of the solution – a friendly face in an organization standing up for each person in need to help give them a voice. I will miss my cases, and the people I've become acquainted with, but I know I will be leaving them in good hands.

Other parts of my work here included helping initiate the ID program. In order to take care of government benefits in Argentina, you need a DNI (identification). For many people however, they cannot benefit from these programs as they do not have one. Either they were never registered, or they lost theirs (a common circumstance when living on the street). My task was figuring out and conducting a plan to get every client without an ID, a new one. Drawing up a plan, we dove into figuring out who we could help get a new ID, including getting a poverty certificate and taking their information to run through the process. Overall, I'm proud of the steps we've taken and glad to be leaving behind a plan to follow.

One other project I was proud to be a part of was sitting in as a representative of Projects Abroad at the Tumbando Rejas magazine meetings. This year, they are doing a larger issue including all the other NGO's in Cordoba. I was tasked with attending meetings at Freire to help with ideas and relay information back to the office. It was great to meet so many outgoing people working together on a project across multiple groups.

Overall, I'd say I was thrown in the deep-end, when it came to learning how to communicate in Spanish. I remember being tasked with talking to clients on the phone to tell them about their appointment. For the first one I created a script to read because I was so nervous. But for some reason, for the second one I had a burst of confidence, and decided to wing it, and was so proud of myself being able to come up with the words I needed to say. At first speaking in Spanish to clients seemed intimidating, but the human rights group gave plenty of practice in tough situations that eventually I found myself speaking with clients back and forth very easily after a couple weeks, which was a really rewarding experience.



*Law & Human Rights volunteers:
Grant Simens and Sif Nielsen-Lundberg*

I recommend future volunteers to get started right away and jump right into their work. It is definitely true that you get back as much as you put in. Also, to really invest in your placements, and try to get out of the office for personal work as much as you can, as it was very rewarding working with the people you are here to help.

As I said, there's a gap that exists between the lives of others. If I were to be thankful for one thing out of this whole experience, working with human rights in Argentina, it would be for allowing me to close the gap between my world and the people I've come to help. I was brought closer to issues far removed from me, and yet, as I leave, I feel that they were my own. If only the whole world could experience something similar, perhaps we wouldn't feel so far away from each other. Tonight I'll be travelling thousands of miles away, but the people of Argentina will still be with me.

HELENE BOGEN

The Megacausa La Perla: Nunca Más

On the 24th of February the Human Rights group went to the *Tribunales Federales* in Cordoba to see a part of the Case of Megacausa La Perla. The Megacausa La Perla is the world's largest trial for crimes against humanity and is a criminal case against police and military personnel for enforced disappearances, torture and killing during the "Dirty War" in the 1970s. In Argentina this case is not only a way to punish the people who committed crimes during the Dirty War; it is also a way of providing the people of Argentina with the truth of what happened during this time period. On the 24th of February the proceedings concerned the prosecution of people from the intelligence party – *Cuerpo de Inteligencia*, and we stayed to watch three witnesses before lunch.

The proceedings started an hour late in classic Argentinian style. The audience, witnesses, prosecutors and the accused were asked to rise as the judges entered the room in smart suits. No one in the courtroom wore court dresses and the dress code was actually rather informal – some of the female defense attorneys even wore colourful jackets! It was very interesting to see how the frame of the proceedings was so much more informal than in Norway, or many other European countries.



Grandmothers of Plaza de Mayo: Looking for their grandsons.

The first witness was an 89 year old lady who had her sister and brother in law disappear during the dirty war. She explained how the military had broken into the house and how she had to go

to Buenos Aires to get her nieces and nephews to take care of them. The two other witnesses were younger and had had their fathers and brothers taken away during the Dirty War. They talked about the screaming they had heard, the memory of the military personnel who broke into their homes, the terror they had felt and the pain they had endured.

At the end of the last testimony one witness was brought to tears at the memory of torture and injustice that people had been subject to. Watching and listening to the witnesses, I could sense the importance of the words which have become a slogan after the Dirty War – *Nunca Jamás* – crimes like the ones committed during the Dirty War shall never again happen in Argentina.

At the end of the court date I could think of only one phrase that encompasses the importance of the proceedings, which has been in progress in Argentina for several years now. These are the words which once described another genocide – the genocide in Cambodia; “Painful though it may be to contemplate these accounts of young survivors, they desperately need to be passed, whole and without softening, from generation to generation. For it is only by such bearing of witness that the rest of us are rendered unable to pretend that true evil is exceedingly rare in the world, or worse, is but a figment.” - American journalist Sydney H. Schanberg.

VITA VAN EVERDINGEN

Legal Services

The four weeks I have been working here have been a perfect mix of legal work and going to the placements. Both tasks I have been assigned to are a lot to handle although they are totally different. But let's talk about the legal work this time.

I don't know if I would say that the legal work is my favorite but it sure is really important and extremely necessary. My legal work started with database-work and trying to improve our working system, which is extremely complicated because of the enormous amount of cases and different kinds of cases that we represent. Everything we have on paper we also need to have in a database.

This brings me to the Ganas forms. This was my second legal task. These forms are interviews with homeless people. After the interview we have to be put all the information we gained into the Ganas database, which works with "Argentine-time" so that makes it for every European vo-

lunteer their favorite job of course. I was one of those Europeans who really had to get used to the pace of the database. But in the end you find out that it's actually in some way relaxing, because there is nothing you can do about it so you just have to go with the flow. I personally like that next part of the chain of databases and forms more. If the person says on the Ganas form that he or she needs legal assistance we can begin to make a case. I like the "making-the-case" part more because it is more brainwork. You have to think about what we can do for them.

After that the lawyers of the human rights office will take it over from you and then we make that plan of how we are going to help the client if we can.

In my third week at the human rights office I went to the legal clinic. The legal clinic is a building in the neighborhood Blas Pascal. The inhabitants of the neighborhood know that we are there on Thursday's in the afternoon and they can come if they need any kind of legal advice. This can be because they lost their ID and need a new one or because they need a pension etc.

The day I was there together with Lalo it was really quiet. Besides the children that were playing on the property only one man came. So unfortunately I can't really say more about my experience with the legal clinic.

The thing with legal work is that while you are doing office work you are indeed helping people immensely, but right at that moment you don't always realize it. What starts with a form ends with knowing someone and some of their biggest problems. In order to get to know the person and their problem, communication is essential. The communication is so important because we need to have a complete and clear view on what the problem is so what we can help them the best we can. I have to admit that the communication with the clients is one of the things I am still not comfortable with. Although they don't care about you fluently speaking Spanish you still feel uneasy. I know for a fact that all volunteers have this in the beginning and I keep on hoping that it gets better every time.

Overall I am really glad that I had the opportunity to do a lot of legal work. It's important to know what is going on behind the scenes. People most of the time only see the deed, but they have no clue about the work that was needed to be done in order to create the deed. By doing legal work I got to see that. After these few weeks I now know more about building a case and I think it will help me a lot further on.

Another kind of pension we can help to apply for is the pension for mother with 7 or more children. We just closed a case for a woman that had to get the blank sheet and present the birth certificates of all her 7 children. Now she's waiting for the pension.

ONGOING PROJECTS

BLAS PASCAL

Waiting for Independence!

Welcome to this month's newsletter! If you are reading it the first time, we must explain a little bit of the story of Blas Pascal. It is a governmental housing built six years ago. The Law & Human Rights Office has been working at the community for two and a half years. We went through a lot of different stages with the neighbours, we built a relationship with them and we have become close and supportive with each other. However, our main goal as an organization is and will be to empower the people through our interventions and programmes, to transmit skills to them for them, as independent people and communities to be able to claim their rights.

Keeping this last objective in mind, we have been working hard, alongside a long line of past and present volunteers, on getting the government recognition for a **"Neighbours Commission"**; this would be a neighbour's institution, legally recognized, that entitles the residents of Blas Pascal to claim against the government, which doesn't always fulfil its duties.

So, after we presented all the papers, the government has made some comments on our presentation, this means we are working on correcting these documents to make the presentation according to what is being asked, and after it the neighbours will have the commission they have been fighting for, for so long!



Neighbors' meeting at Blas Pascal 's Community Center

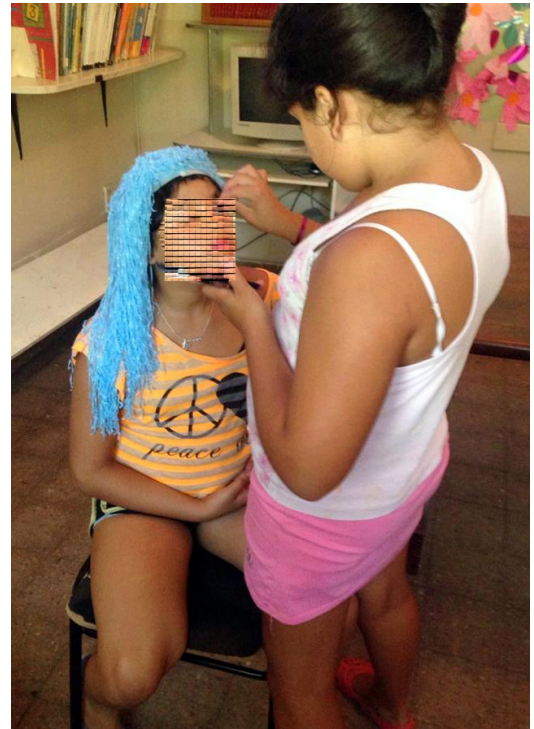
We are still by their side, and at the same time we are starting to say goodbye.

Victoria Marton

OPERATIONAL PLAN

My time with the girls from Quisqui, Soaje and Cecam

This article is going to be an article written from my heart. I actually never thought I would be able to write this kind of article before I came here to Argentina. Before I came here, I knew that I would end up in situations, where I would be very close to fragile people, people who would need me, not to mention people I would become very close to, in a way that you can't experience, in your safe daily life at home. But I would never expect to want to stay because I feel that there are so many things I could do here, and because it was heart breaking to leave the people I have touched, not to mention, the people who have touched me.



Activity with the girls from Quisquisicate.

In the two months I have been here, I have visited girls in institutions, who each face difficulties in their lives. The places Quisqui and Soaje are institutions where girls live, because their parents have been deemed by the court as unfit or incapable of caring for them. Some of the girls still see their parents or one of their parents, and love and miss them very much and some of the girls can't remember if they have a family. It is my impression that they all feel let down.

The third place, I have been visiting is a place named Cecam which is for girls who have committed or were involved in serious crimes. I remember that I tried to imagine what it would be like. What could a girls' prison be like, housing girls who have committed a serious crime? But after my first meeting with the girls, I had to laugh about myself and my thoughts. In my eyes, it is a place housing teenage girls, lovely girls who all share more or less the same background: poor neighbourhoods, not surrounded by ambitions, but by crime and bad influence.

I was asked to make an Operational Plan for the placements Quisqui, Soaje and Cecam. I already felt like I knew a lot about each placement, but at the same time I knew that if I have to make a document about the three placements, that every knew volunteer should read when they arrive; I had to do a lot of research. First of all, what is an Operational Plan exactly, and why is it neces-

sary for the Law and Human Rights office to have one? When you arrive in a country, you don't know that country's problems, you're not used to the same at home, so where do you start. Which problems should we deal with, how can we do that best, and what is the goal?

Operational planning is the process of planning strategic goals. It's a plan dealing with what you should achieve in a certain amount of time. In this case, one year.

The Law and Human Rights in South Africa, found a source of how to deal with the girls at the placements: Abilities for life.

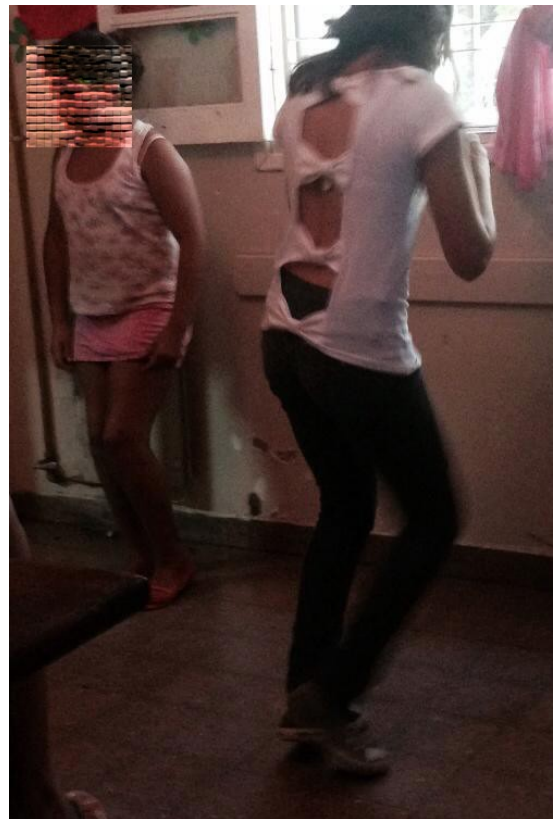
Abilities for life deals with how to work with children and young people, and deals with difficult situations like the girls at Quisqui, Soaje and Cecam. It works with the services children should be provided with like healthcare, time to play and education. As well as the factors that the children need to be protected from: exploitation, abuses etc. And the need for the children to discuss topics that concern them.

After a lot of research about abilities for life, the operational plan, and the journals from the previous year's I really started to think about what the main

goal is for us volunteers to go and make activities with the girls. I asked different people, working at the office, about what they thought about that question. They all replied things like: we were there to be a good influence, make them think about their lives and teach them to have ambitions for themselves. One of the answers were perfect:

It is our job, to plant a small seed in the girls' heads. For every activity, and for all the time we spend with the girls, we will make the seed grow a small bit each time.

The seed represent the second choice. The girls' don't have to go back to crime, or the people



Dancing activity with the girls at Quisquisicate.

who are a bad influence on them. They can go their own way, and we will help them see that way.

I think that every volunteer will take different things and experience home with them. Every volunteer who has been visiting these three placements has used time planning out activities with a hope that this activity could help the seed in the girls grow. Personally I will always remember these three episodes: one girl in Cecam told me, that I had been a very good friend to her, and she would like to be more like me. Then she took my hands, looked me in my eyes, and promised not to commit crime again, she wanted a different life.

One activity I planned for the girls, that I always will remember, is when I asked the girls in Cecam to write down five people in their life, that are the most important to them. After that, they had to place the people on a scale, from one to ten, of how much they loved them, and in a same scale, they had to put how good an influence these people are for them. They reacted very strong, and several of the girls, began to cry because they really started to think about, their lives, and the people who affected them and their decisions in life.



A present from one of the girls at Quisquiccate for volunteer Donna Douvartzidis.

The experience I will remember the most, is one that made me react in a way that surprised me very much. One girl at Soaje was devastated because it was my last day, and she cried for an hour, and kept hugging me. When I had to leave, and she let go of me, I started crying. I was so surprised over my reaction, and it hurt to let go of this girl. I had never expected that I could feel so close to a little girl, that I've only known for such a small time. But I realized in that moment, that I really did. It was a great feeling, at the same time, that I really have touched that girl. But I can say from my heart, that she also has touched me strongly. To be honest, all the girls have.

Sif Nielsen-Lundberg

FOUNDATION GANAS

Homeless

The world itself is changing, and so do I, so do we. In the law and human rights office we are pursuing the kind of change that can make us grow.

During these two months many volunteers have been and planted their seeds. Susan, María, Geeske, Sif, Grant, Simone, Vita, and now Donna come to my mind.

We've been working with all of our skills to make opportunities available for those without opportunities. So in these two months we started by giving people the certainty that we are going to be there for them again this year.



Law & Human Rights Manager, Victoria Marton, and people from Foundation GANAS..

People on the street, the homeless, do not easily trust new people. That's why we need to show them that we are serious in our work without losing our capability of being kind and comprehensive. On the other hand we need to be patient and wait for them to come to the best solution. We want to solve their problems, but we are there just for helping, they must be open to get help and advice.

With Grant we have been working on several projects and cases. There is one that caught my attention and it is the case of Mrs. Ortega. She's a homeless person from Ganas and now needs for us to help her get a pension. She didn't have a phone so it was almost impossible to get in touch with her. So María who was involved with this case decided to donate her phone at her departure. Grant's mission was to give to Mrs. Ortega the phone.

After two or three weeks of looking for her and bringing the box with the phone and its charger every time at Ganas Grant finally found Mrs. Ortega. That was their first encounter. She was so happy and Grant was almost jumping for joy.

A few weeks ago I met her again and asked about her phone. She said that she has no phone. Grant found out about this situation the next day. He was really disturbed about it. He couldn't believe that she said that when himself, in the flesh, give her the phone.

The story with this woman is yet not finished. We have to see where it goes. But this allows me to say something and it's that the thing about Human Rights is that we are struggling to change these people's lives, to give them opportunities. There are going to be happy endings, like in the past, but it is all about what happens in the meanwhile.



Volunteer Sif Nielsen-Lundberg assisting people in homeless situation.

We can show them the way, but the path is for them to take, it's not up to us. What is up to us is being there to do something that makes everyday count and get the best strategy to make those changes last, in time.

So what are you going to do about it? Fortunately, that's up to you.

Farewell my friend, see you next month.

Lalo Acosta Lera