

# PROJECTS ABROAD ARGENTINA

## LAW & HUMAN RIGHTS REPORT



### Volunteer Stories

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# VOLUNTEER STORIES

## VERITY BURROWS

All the volunteers that come to Argentina are able to help the community in a certain way, some of them generate changes in the short term, and others are able to generate really significant improvements for the long term. This year we had a lot of volunteers that made enormous contributions to their placements. Such is the case of our Law and Human Rights volunteer, Verity Burrows.

Verity came to Cordoba in early September. During these two and a half months she has been working very hard in the creation of Blas Pascal's Neighbours Commission, a project that was started and carried out by Projects Abroad Human Rights team and volunteers.

This initiative started because the government doesn't recognize Blas Pascal as a neighbourhood. People have been living in that area for years and it still isn't delimited in Cordoba's map nor provided with public services.

Verity committed to Blas Pascal's residents and worked very hard to get all the legal documents, maps, and other Municipality requirements needed for this project. At the beginning, this was a very difficult task because everything was completely new to her. Neighbours barely knew her and found it very difficult to trust a foreigner with such an important issue.



After some time, she could see how residents began to rely on her. Blas Pascal's Neighbours Commission was formed. It included 10 members: 6 Blas Pascal residents and 4 from the next neighbourhood Nuevo Progreso. They met in Blas Pascal every two weeks. As time went by, neighbours started to get more involved in the project.

To finalize the project, residents were invited to a meeting to sign the final statutes to recognize Blas Pascal's neighbourhood. Unluckily, some neighbours didn't show up, that's why they had to repeat this same action a week after. This was the final step to make Blas Pascal a recognized neighbourhood.



Furthermore, Verity worked on other legal cases. Together with Martin, Projects Abroad's Legal Coordinator, they carried out a case in which they helped a person avoid litigation costs. This case had her going to court for several days. She worked on it by herself, with Martin's supervision.

Also, Verity helped to write the argument for an "*amparo*" action meant to force the owners of a big piece of land in Blas Pascal to build a sidewalk in the main street. This street is very busy and it is very dangerous for neighbours to walk down the street where cars travel at a great speed.

She also worked in projects like Foundation GANAS, and orphanages Soaje and Quisquiccate. The whole experience was extremely enriching for her, she thinks that she got more from the project than what the community got from her.

Verity recently received her law degree. However, she doesn't know if she wants to work as a lawyer. She sees herself working at an NGO, but if she can get to choose, she will rather live her life volunteering.



## METTE STAEDERHAL



Mette came from Australia for a twelve week Law and Human Rights volunteering stint in Argentina. She was a marketer at a big firm when she decided that wasn't the place to be. Coming for a Law and Human Rights volunteering project in Argentina was her first step to become a social worker.

She has participated in most of the Human Rights Projects: Foundation GANAS, Basta de Trata, CeCam, Blas Pascal, Quisquiscate and Soaje.

Her most memorable experience was working in the girls' orphanages Quisquiscate and Soaje. These placements offer a home to girls that have been removed from their families because of domestic violence or abuse.

Mette spent a lot of her time visiting the girls at Soaje, who are between 16 and 19 years old. Due to the girls' background, it is very important to encourage a positive self-esteem and to teach them about healthy relationships.

Most of the girls come from tough family backgrounds. They are neglected, sad, upset and mistreated. Volunteers encourage them to help each other and create a supportive and caring environment for the girls.

Usually girls don't like to open up and talk about their past. It is very difficult for volunteers to establish a deep conversation with them and get to know why they are in the institute.

Thanks to her Spanish, Mette was able to connect with some girls and talk to them. She told them about her own past, which was difficult as well. Mette saw a lot of herself in them, they shared experiences and the girls understood that although she came from a developed country, life can be hard there too.

She also helped the older girls to make CV's so that they can find jobs and gave them some basic tips on how to prepare for a job interview. Three of the girls want to be social workers, and they said they wanted to change things from their families.

Mette described this volunteering project as a life changing experience, she will never regret coming to Argentina and her life will never be the same after this. The whole project made her feel extremely grateful and appreciative for her life. She knew that she wanted to be a social worker, but now she's one hundred per cent sure about it.

## SOPHIE STIEKEMA

At only 17 years old, Sophie came from Italy for a care volunteering project at the day care centre Copa de Leche. She always enjoyed spending time with kids and she knew some basic Spanish, making a care project the perfect option for her.



Working with kids at Copa de Leche isn't an easy task. Children from Blas Pascal neighbourhood can sometimes be disrespectful and naughty, due to the lack of control they receive from their parents at home.

Sophie came out with great ideas regarding the kids' nutrition, changing sugary snacks to fruits and vegetables. Her project was going very well but Sophie thought that she could help much more. That's why, after a month and a half, she decided to change to the Law and Human Rights Project.

She was involved in several projects, like girls orphanages Quisquiccate and Soaje, Basta de Trata and Foundation GANAS.

Her most important projects were Quisquiccate and Foundation GANAS. She worked in Quisquiccate two days a week, for an hour and a half each day. Girls in Quisquiccate are between the ages of 8 and 16 years old, and have been removed from their families because of sexual abuse or domestic violence. In these cases, it is very difficult to establish a real and deep relationship with them, to get to know and understand why they are there.

During her first days, she worked on creating a bond with the girls. She did this by playing and trying to distract them from their difficult situations. She organized various activities to interact and connect with them. One of them was a card game in which there were several cards. Each of the girls had written a question on it. The questions varied from important to less important areas, starting from "Who is your idol?" to "How is your family formed?" This activity was very successful; some of the girls opened up and talked with Sophie about themselves and their families.

On the other side, she really enjoyed working in GANAS, a foundation which gives food to the homeless people in the city centre. Volunteers go downtown to a main square and interview people, to see if they need documents or a pension.

They interviewed around 315 people and are working with the national government to get them documentation and try to give them pensions.

Sophie will return home in a week. She wants to be a lawyer and do humanitarian work. She is really eager to continue helping in her country and motivate others to volunteer.

### *Visit to La Perla Detention Centre*

One of the most powerful and memorable experiences of law and human rights volunteers in Argentina is visiting the former detention centre known as La Perla, on the outskirts of Cordoba City. What happened at La Perla marks a dark period in Argentine history called *La Guerra Sucia* (the Dirty War) between 1976-1983. During this period of state terrorism, approximately 30,000 people, mostly young university age students, went missing. They were taken to military detention centres around the country, and the majority were tortured and killed. In Argentina, they are referred to as “the disappeared,” as most of these people have never been found in the years following the dictatorship.



La Perla was Cordoba’s principal detention centre during the years of state terrorism. I visited La Perla on November 26, 2014 — a day etched in my memory — with a group of law and human rights volunteers, staff members and with Daniel, a friend of my host family. Daniel is a survivor of La Perla and offered to accompany our group and share his story. We were honoured to listen to his incredible story and receive his guidance while walking through the grounds and buildings where he had been held and tortured at age 22, after being abducted from a home he shared with other students in Cordoba, while studying to be a priest. Afterward, he spent time recovering, living and working in the United States after being granted asylum there. He now lives with his family in Argentina. At La Perla, Daniel personally experienced and witnessed traumatic human rights abuses and crimes that have impacted the rest of his life. He is one of only a few hundred survivors. He has testified in federal court against these injustices, and continues to assist in bringing perpetrators to justice.

Testimonies like Daniel's reflect the value and importance of speaking truth to power. Sharing the truth is a form of resistance, resilience, and healing. Because Daniel was with us that day to tell us, in his own words, what happened we were all shaken and changed for the better. I came away saddened and moved, but with a deepened awareness of the suffering of so many innocent people around the world who continue to experience oppression daily.



I also felt a renewed appreciation for the many freedoms that I take for granted in my life and my own country, Canada. Daniel's story, ultimate survival and witness also teaches me and others like me that truth, love and solidarity will always prevail over evil and cruelty, separation and even death.

La Perla itself is now a space for survivors, relatives and loved ones to take back lost power, restore brokenness and share the identities and stories of resilience of the loved ones who were held there, through art, poems, pictures, murals, artefacts, writings, and other forms of expression exhibited in their memory at the centre.

The military officials who were in power during *La Guerra Sucia* are currently being tried in a federal court in Argentina and convicted for crimes against humanity. Dozens of perpetrators and hundreds of witnesses, including survivors like Daniel and relatives of the disappeared, have been providing testimonies over the last few years at the on-going trials.

Many law and human rights volunteers also attend and witness these powerful and moving trials. The proceedings are conducted in Spanish; for those volunteers with less extensive understanding of Spanish, a coordinator explains before and after the proceedings what was happening. Other multilingual volunteers help with translation as well.

The current proceedings reveal to volunteers the impressive and positive steps Argentina is taking to prosecute former government officials, provide a nationally sanctioned space for the truth to be told by witnesses to the country and to the world, and to allow for justice and healing to emerge from these profound human rights abuses.

## AMELIE BERZ & CELINE VERGOTTE

### *Discrimination on behalf of the Law*

***Every 13 minutes, an adolescent in Córdoba is being arrested illegally by the “Código de Faltas”.***

Juan\*, one of the boys that come to Paulo Freire daily, looks around at his friends before he answers our question. “Yes, most of the boys here have been caught by policemen who are applying the *Código de faltas*. They just stop you, start interrogating you and have the power to detain you if they want, without any reason.”



The *Código de Faltas* is a provincial law of Córdoba passed by the Legislature, numbered 8431. Supposedly the *Código* exists to penalize certain acts which are harmful to daily life. It authorises the police to detain individuals who commit a “misdemeanour”. Or, to put it in other words: anyone looking “suspicious”. They can impose a fine of up to 5000 pesos (approx. £374) or a term of detention for up to 180 days. In addition, a person can be held in a police station for up to three days as a form of “preventative detention”. The penalty, which will remain in the register for two years, is then decided by a police commissioner or sub-commissioner. It’s possible to appeal the judgement, although this has to be done by someone else if the concerned individual has been detained.

The Centro Socioeducativo Paulo Freire is a correctional day school for young non-violent offenders and one of the institutions Projects Abroad has been working with for the last two years. Here, the boys learn about the consequences of their actions as well as about their rights – because in the case of the *Código de Faltas*, it is an official law and the discrimination it entails aggravates the process of learning to live according to and peacefully with the law.

There are two main reasons why the *Código* is unconstitutional. One being the fact that its proceedings violate the constitutional rights of legal defence and access to justice: Although the Argentinian constitution guarantees both a defence lawyer and an independent and impartial judge, neither is it “necessary” to have a lawyer nor is a police commissioner “independent” or “impartial”.



Secondly, the law penalises certain personal liberties. For example, it allows officers to arrest individuals who are drinking alcohol in public, “acting suspiciously” around buildings and vehicles, engaging in sex work or demonstrating on the street.

There's no need for anyone to be offended or outraged, the policeman himself decides when to act. The *Código* therefore affects your right to move about freely, to work and to freedom of expression.

Our task as volunteers in Argentina is to think about what can be done to prevent such discrimination from happening. Probably the most popular and famous event happening in order to fight the *Código de faltas* is the *Marcha De La Gorra*.

The *Marcha De La Gorra* 2014 took place the 20th of November. It was already the 8th time that the march has taken place in the province of Cordoba. More than 20 000 people and a total of 60 organisations attended the march. The purpose of the march is to raise awareness around the problems of the persecution and harassment of certain stereotypical juveniles. Together with the boys from Freire, we, the Human Rights volunteers of Projects Abroad, attended the march.

In general, we all enjoyed the march. It was very interesting to see how there is unity between all those different people and organisations that undergo some kind of discrimination inflicted by police officers. The general atmosphere was very peaceful and energetic. People were dancing, talking, singing, laughing, playing music and painting. With banners, every organisation made themselves visible in the march. A couple of organisations that caught our eye were the Abuelas, elderly people who search for their grandchildren, and prostitutes who fight against the discrimination of sex work.

Every organisation that attended the march had a different story and a different end goal, but after all, they all fight for the same purpose, which is to end the discrimination police officers practise on a daily basis.

