

Painting the Town Red Green, Yellow, Blue, Purple, Pink and Orange



They were very clear with us, and we with them. We had limited resources and good intentions, and would take very clear and simple steps to help, and would tell the world the Belen story, to spread the word. They liked the idea of painting the houses; it was easy; cheap and a good first step toward elevating the spirit of this depressed and hurting community. So we came back.

We spent one day in Lima visiting the young women at Santa Margarita Prison, while our 4-person mural team, led by Francisco Letelier, a Chilean mural artist, flew immediately to Iquitos and began a large 3-panel mural at the edge of one of the few soccer fields, which, as in most of the rest of Belen, is under 15 feet of water from February through June. They worked surrounded by hundreds of curious children.

Forty clowns arrived August 3, and we went straightaway to Belen where we clowning in the streets with the people of Belen. The ditches carrying raw sewage and garbage; the trash, the dog shit, and the dead rat in the street; the mangy dogs so emaciated we were aghast and astonished; vivid outdoor markets with vendors selling bananas, charcoal, tangerines, oranges, papaya, fired and fresh fish, clothing, household goods; with pedestrians, trucks, workers, porters, and the 3-wheeled motor taxis crowding the streets; and we clowns with puppets, bubbles, balloons, playing music, dancing, surrounded by scores of children.

Please click on the "Peru" slide show link on www.hospitalclown.com to get the full color of this event.

by John Glick

August 2006 Iquitos, Peru:

We came from Canada, Colombia, Italy, Argentina, Chile, and the US; 32 clowns -- among them a mural artist, an expert in urban gardening, a philosophy professor, 4 Airline Ambassadors, and our 10-person college clown team, all joining with our dear friends, the Bola Roja Hospital Clown team from Peru, for two weeks early August 2006. Lan Airlines donated flights for 40 of us to fly from Lima to Iquitos, a city of 300,000 on the Amazon River. Generous private donations supported our project, to bring 50 clown volunteers to visit hospitals, hospices, prisons, orphanages, special needs facilities, AND to paint as many homes as we could in the poorest area of the city, a settlement of 15,000 people called "Belen" (translated "Bethlehem").

Patch had dreamed of this effort -- a first step of hopefully many toward addressing the despair we encountered in Belen while clowning last year. A small group of us returned on a fact-finding mission in April and met with 40 local community leaders to hear their concerns, their hopes, their needs. The problems are big (high child mortality from diarrheal illness, malaria, and malnutrition; unclean water; no waste or garbage removal; prostitution, high

crime, alcoholism, family violence, unemployment; very limited access to health-care; sexual abuse of children; the list was a long one). The proposed solutions involved varying degrees of complexity (clean water; a system for human waste removal; garbage collection; good food; infrastructure for bridges, water runoff, playgrounds; clinics; schools; outreach programs for HIV, malaria, nutrition, immunizations, and more). These changes have been much promised by politicians and the people have been consistently disappointed. Nothing ever changed.



Personal clowning highlights for me included a psychiatric residential facility where I had a salsa lesson from a mass murderer (he encouraged my unsteady efforts, telling me "You're doing very well."); A wonderful musical improvisation with Ginevra, Bowen and a 10-year-old orphan, (something about "Ching-go-lay"); a long cuddling with a wooly monkey; musical clowning with Anne and her puppet at an AIDS hospice for a group of emaciated and entranced young men, [See photo on previous page] and all the time a dead guy in a casket in the lobby.

Our Airline Ambassador team delivered personal hygiene kits to 50 senior citizens in a long-term care facility in Iquitos, and brought schoolbooks and supplies for 45 children to a school in a remote section of Belen, along with a stretcher for medical emergencies in this community. To get there, they took boats across the river, then hiked 45 minutes through the jungle.

Our Iquitos coordinator, Lucia, arranged our clown visits and the painting project. We clowned in the morning, painted in the afternoon when people living in the homes could help after their workday. She chose Venice Street, a boundary street between two districts on Belen, stretching from the waterfront to a small plaza at the top of a steady rise. Bananas, oranges, and charcoal were carried from boats on the backs of a steady stream of porters, to be sold from the street by vendors. The houses were made of wood, brick or cement, with corrugated metal or thatch roofing. A few homes were fronted by a table or two, selling meals. Another functioned as a tiny convenience store. Some buildings were used for storage on the bottom level, dwelling places on the top level. Chickens, parrots, monkeys and pigs lived either with or in close proximity to the people themselves. Some homes had 7-10 people, most of them children. Furnishings were spare; a table, a few wooden stools, maybe a bed, a couple of hammocks, a rusty grill for cooking, shelving for pots and pans. No electricity. No running water or toilets. People squatted over shallow latrines or buckets inside a small tarp encircled cubicle. A ditch ran along either side of the street carrying raw sewage to the river.

After we began painting, it became clear that to finish our work, we would have to paint morning and night, as the wood and stucco needed several coats of paint to carry the colors. People at first were tentative about colors, wanting more bland

blues, greens and browns. But when they saw the possibilities with more brilliant color schemes they became enthusiastic in their color choices. Tangerine, turquoise, pink, yellow, purple, red. We used oil-based enamel paints, mixing our own colors in the heat. Water was in much demand, painting in the heat of the day. We would finish the day drenched in sweat. Everyone worked very hard, painting 2-3 houses, often on homemade ladders or on narrow landings. Some houses were painted entirely by clowns, some entirely by locals, and most by teams of locals and clowns. Many onlookers, many children. We were joined by a handful of teenage street boys (some of whom are homeless) who did a lot of painting. I recall both Alex and Julio on one ladder painting second-story windows. I recall Juan Carlos painting beautiful designs on a building front. Never a complaint from any of the painting team except for more paint. We were joined the next-to-last day by 25 Lan Airline volunteers who painted 10 buildings. That afternoon we painted while it drizzled all day.

The Belen locals kept asking "Who are you? Are you from a church? A political party?" They were skeptical at first then as they learned why we were there. ("We want to change the world through concrete, loving caring acts....Maybe it'll catch on. If not, still we are having fun. Wanna paint?"). We were told many times that this was the first time they could recall that anyone had helped them here without asking something in return.

Through Foncho, a Bola Roja clown doctor, we visited and lunched with two leaders of La Restinga (the name comes from an Amazonian word meaning "safe land"; the land that never floods even in the rainy season), the only organization working directly to support the 180 child sex workers in Iquitos, by offering meaningful alternatives to sexual work, and helping the children withdraw from sexual labor. They estimate 250 children are involved. The outreach effort provides school tutoring, healthcare, counseling, meals, theater and art education, computers and friendship. We were inspired by their work and the last night in Iquitos 15 clowns visited the facility (the dancing was good and joyful). That day Nanny, Kate and I asked the owner of the tallest house on Venice Street if she wanted us to paint a message for Belen on the top floor of her building. She wanted something about children, about sexual abuse. Kate painted "Stop sexual abuse of

boys and girls." Many nodding heads from passers by.

We finished with a parade through Belen, first to the mural site where, we took the largest group photo in Gesundheit clown history; 50 clowns and 300 children. The parade then moved eventually through the now colorful rainbow of Venice Street, where new friends shared hugs, smiles, handshakes, laughter, and tears. Together we painted 70 homes with 369 gallons of paint, 70 gallons of paint thinner, lots of gloves, brushes and rags.

A group both exhausted and energized left Peru the next day. Every person on our incredible team was inspired and humbled by this experience. What does this mean? What did we really accomplish? There is a school with schoolbooks that didn't have them before. There is a street that, rather than with the normal grays and browns of a poverty stricken community, greets the eye like a rainbow. From a building a beautiful script announces an intention to stop child sexual abuse. People are left with an experience of cooperation and friendliness and sharing. Children have played with clowns, and laughed. Street boys have worked together with doctors and lawyers on the same team. Our youth staff has experienced leading an international service mission. We make deeper connections with the helping effort in Iquitos, in Belen. Gesundheit, Bola Roja, and Airline Ambassadors are developing deeper connections with each other. Zappo goes further into the lives and hearts of street children, modeling good friend, good father, good brother. I dance with a murderer. All this feels like a step toward a more hopeful and just future.

We hope to interest others in helping to heal what ails Belen. So much is needed? infrastructure, money, education, healthcare, volunteers. . . We are firm in our good intentions, in our certainty that the answers to the Belen problems will come mostly through the efforts and ideas of the people of Belen, and in our willingness to continue doing the simple direct caring acts that are our philosophy.

If there are ways you can help, contact me. We plan to do another paint and mural project next August, and will explore clean water initiatives, gardening, healthcare and educational projects.

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