

VOLUNTEERING AT
THE UNIDAD ACADEMICA CAMPESINA – CARMEN PAMPA (UAC)

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Our Mission

We are a volunteer program for persons who wish to live with the rural poor and to assist them through education. Our mission at the UAC-Carmen Pampa is:

- To make higher education available to young rural students who would not otherwise have that opportunity. The college is located in a rural area and encourages students to return to their rural communities as agents of change.
- To prepare young rural Bolivians to serve their community as professionals with a commitment to bettering the lot of the most poor.
- To develop extension programs which address the critical needs of the surrounding rural communities. To help teams of students move out into the community in instruction and apprenticeship programs.
- To strengthen progress and socio-economic liberation through academic research. To initiate research programs targeted to local needs and to integrate the successful research into the countryside.

Background: UAC-Carmen Pampa

The people of the Nor Yungas, Bolivia are mainly of indigenous Aymara or Afro-Bolivian decent who until 1952 endured indentured servitude. Though most of the older people speak Aymara, Spanish is the common language of the young in schools. After working as an educator 12 years in the Nor Yungas, Sister Damon Nolan realized that a high school education was not adequate to give campesinos control over their own destiny. In 1992 she came to an agreement with the local Aymaran farmers' organization to build a college together. Some of the farmers signed the pact with a thumb print. The school was to be for poor rural you who cannot afford the cost of urban universities. The farmers stipulated that it was to be situated in the rural community and to address local problems - malnutrition, poor healthcare, and the difficulty of subsistence farming on tiny mountainous farm plots. Consequently the UAC offers degrees in nursing, agronomy, veterinary science, education, and now eco-tourism. The programs are accredited by the Catholic University of Bolivia.

Much of the physical building of the college was done with the donated labor of the local farmers. Students also spend four to eight hours a week working to maintain and build the school. The college receives no aid from the Bolivian government but is partially subsidized by donations to the Carmen Pampa Fund in the United States and by other grants. Enrollment has grown from 52 students in 1992 to almost 700 with an equal ratio of women to men.

Over the 15 years of its existence the UAC has succeeded in training professionals who have returned to their communities as leaders in politics and businesses. The nurse, raise animals, become involved in micro-loan projects or NGOs offering instruction or aid to compesinos. The UAC has published research and initiated outreach programs in nursing, pig raising, goat raising, family farms, coffee growing, medicinal plants, cheese and honey production. Many of these outreach programs offer seeds or young animals, instruction, and the promise to buy back what they produce at above market prices for processing and marketing in UAC facilities.

Specific Considerations for Volunteers:

Spanish: Volunteers must be able to communicate to some extent in Spanish. Exceptions may be made depending on a volunteer's skills. Excellent Spanish language programs of six weeks to five months are available in Cochabamba, Bolivia.

Pay: Unfortunately, there is currently no funding for non-teaching volunteers – they would have to be self supported. Volunteers who teach (e.g. English) will receive a stipend of \$100/month per course. A copy of a college diploma is required to teach English. Teaching one course provides enough income to live here. Each person living at the volunteer house contributes about \$50/month for food, and house upkeep.

Length of Stay: How much time need a volunteer stay to make a difference? It is a genuine sacrifice for volunteers to interrupt their jobs and join us in Bolivia sometimes at considerable financial expense to themselves. Most volunteers desire to experience a fascinating culture and at the same time to help the poor. For both reasons it is advantageous to live here a year in order to acclimate to the language and

culture and to discover where to make the best contribution. This amount of time is not always possible. Depending on what the volunteer wishes to accomplish, much can be accomplished in a shorter time period.

The need for Volunteers: What might a volunteer do here? There are opportunities for tutoring, helping at the health post, working in the gardens, organizing weekend activities for the students, teaching in the English program, assisting in the library and computer labs, organizing and overseeing sports events, doing interviews and taking pictures for Carmen Pampa Fund publications, and teaching small classes in your area of interest, e.g. health, good parenting, computers, art, or music. Volunteers may wish to help with maintenance, repair, building, waste recycling, care of farm animals, or teaching students how to promote rural tourism. Carmen Pampa has a grade and boarding high school also in need of help – help teaching reading and English, children’s library and play programs. Think about your skills and interests and formulate an idea of what you’d like to attempt here. Be aware that sharing your ideas will only be one part of your contribution. Another part will be learning, working and sweating alongside Bolivians to discover solutions together.

Our Vision: The UAC is a Catholic school founded by the Missionary Franciscan Sisters of the Immaculate Conception. Volunteers share a variety of faith traditions and beliefs but a common love of Bolivian farm families. The volunteer program is meant for sincere people of all spiritual affiliations – religious, areligious, agnostic, atheist. We respect our differences and are enriched by them. At the same time we try to live and support each other as a community in the spirit of St. Francis. This means we try to share the simple lives of those around us and imitate their respect for the environment. We are committed to assisting everyone but especially the poorest. There are opportunities for prayer with the Franciscan Sisters. Weekly meetings of the volunteer community include discussion of practical house matters for everyone followed by an optional session to share and to reflect on our experience here. These times of reflection and sharing are simple and are generally prepared by the volunteers according to their particular taste and preferences.

Living Arrangements: Most live in the Volunteer House. We have agreed to share household tasks, taking equal turns cooking, shopping, and cleaning. We are committed to supporting each other. Our life style is simple but healthy. Fruits and vegetables are plentiful in Bolivia and some meats are available. The house is a somewhat dilapidated but historic adobe hacienda which is fitted with indoor plumbing and screens. Each volunteer has his own small room with simple accommodations. Occasionally we have had to double up when visitors come, and may have to do so on a regular basis if we have more volunteers than bedrooms. All water must be boiled before drinking. We lack hot water except for electric shower heads. Water flow occasionally stops completely or becomes cloudy with clay and must be filtered. There are occasional power outages. We wash our laundry by hand and dry it in the sun. Transportation is slow and often stressful in crowded, tardy mini-vans. We have direct cable internet but it is frequently interrupted for weeks at a time.

The volunteer house welcomes married couples who are willing to put up with the lack of privacy. For couples and families it is possible to rent a tiny very primitive house near the campus or something more

livable in Coroico. For a variety reasons, the volunteer house is not an optimal situation for a young couple exploring a temporary relationship. They too are invited to find living arrangements nearby.

Young volunteers who wish a more intense immersion into the Bolivian/Aymara culture and the Spanish language can opt to live with the students in the dormitories and eat in their dining halls. It is probably the best way for a young person to experience the culture in a short time and gain the esteem and friendship of Bolivian peers. It is a hard lifestyle with its barracks-style dormitories, common bathroom/showers, and limited Bolivian cuisine. However the welcome sign is always hanging at the hacienda should a volunteer need a respite or feel sick.

Smoking: Smoking no longer allowed at the UAC, either inside or outside. Opportunities for volunteers to smoke would be limited to the enclosed outside areas of the house.

Safety: The community of Carmen Pampa (pop. 170) is four hours from La Paz - far enough in the country to be outside of the political upheavals and urban crime of the large cities. People in this area are accustomed to outsiders and generally welcome them. We walk without fear at night. The tourist town of Coroico (Pop: 20 thousand) is a 35 minute minibus ride from here. It is also safe though it is always best not to walk alone in the town at night. We have very few dangerous animals or snakes in this area. At an altitude of five thousand feet we have no problem with the mosquito-borne diseases malaria and yellow fever.

Health:

To deal with the mountainous terrain and living conditions, volunteers should enjoy good physical/psychological health and have normal energy levels. Age is not a constraint. Special dietary needs might present a problem. For the health needs of volunteers there is an on-campus clinic and pharmacy open during school hours. There is also a government health center near the volunteer's house where a doctor or nurse is available year round. Currently an English-speaking nurse is resident at the volunteer house and a Bolivian nurse and doctor live very nearby for night-time emergencies. If necessary, transportation will be arranged to the hospital in Coroico seven miles away. The hospital has departments of trauma care, obstetrics, gynecology, pediatrics, surgery and internal medicine. They also offer basic dental care. For more serious medical attention the volunteer will be accompanied to one of the modern hospitals in La Paz which has some English-speaking staff. This is a three and a half hour drive. Health care and medications are not expensive here but volunteers should consider medical insurance which covers serious problems. Some medical insurance may also cover emergency evacuation to the U.S.

Friendship: There are inevitable periods of loneliness and depression on entering any foreign culture. Volunteers must be psychologically prepared to endure an adjustment period. There are ample opportunities for supportive friendship and fun with other volunteers and with Bolivians. Young volunteers will meet other young people with whom they can safely have a good time.

We encourage volunteers to socialize in a group setting. The volunteer is here for a brief time to perform a service. A foreign boyfriend or girlfriend can appear to be an alluring solution to loneliness but experience has shown us that entering into an exclusive romantic relationship distracts the volunteer from her/his primary goal here, is detrimental to community life, and may be unfair to the Bolivian partner. The volunteer should decide he or she is willing to postpone dating relationships while volunteering in Carmen Pampa.

Start of Semester: The two school year semesters are out of sync with those in the northern hemisphere. One semester begins on the first Tuesday in February, and the other on the last Tuesday in July. Volunteers who are teaching should arrive at least a week before school starts.

Hallmarks of effective volunteers:

1. It helps to be outgoing and self-motivated. Volunteers who get out of the house to talk to community members and actively look for things to do when their "job" slows down find their experience here is more meaningful. They feel helpful here where one minute a translator is needed, and the next someone to swing a hammer, and then someone to re-boot a computer.
2. It is best to be fearless in speaking Spanish. None of us speak perfectly, some are very far from being fluent, but volunteers need to jump in without worry about their limitations and communicate using whatever words and non-verbal cues they can muster. Students and local people here are usually very tolerant and patient.
3. A sense of humor is invaluable. Things here move at a very different pace, with much more emphasis on relationships than on accomplishments. For an outsider the frustration level can be high. If the volunteer can chuckle and regroup to try new ways of getting things done it can make all the difference.

More information: For stories and photos see <http://carmenpampa.blogspot.com/2005/03/volunteer-handbook.html> and current volunteer blogs like <http://jean-lee-bolivia.blogspot.com> .

You can purchase a 45 minute DVD entitled Evolution Not Revolution which includes interviews with the foundress, Sr. Damon Nolan, with students, parents, and professors as well as footage of the campus and its spectacular surrounding mountain valley. You will also get a sense of how the Aymara and Spanish are used here. Request from Paul Lechtenberg at 1323 Quincy Street N.E. Washington DC, 20017. lechtenb@gmail.com The cost is \$10.

Does this fit with your time frame, pocketbook, ambitions and hopes? Thank you for taking time to consider this. You probably have other questions. Please e-mail us. If after consideration you find you are still interested, please fill out and e-mail the following application to Lee Lechtenberg at lechtel@gmail.com. We will review your application and respond. **Thank you.**