

Changing lives through water & flowers

On the south side of the city of Cochabamba in Bolivia, at the very end of the number 111 trufi ride (Bolivian privately-run minibuses) lies the Comunidad María Auxiliadora. This is a community of over 370 homes perched on a hillside in the Andian mountains, that aims to improve the lives of low income families, especially women and children

Many poor homes in Bolivia are built on illegal land using whatever materials are to hand without any attention being paid to facilities. Here at the Comunidad María Auxiliadora the community has got together to help each other and bring some of the principals of the new socialist government and Prime Minister Evo Morales into the heart of their community.

Jo Maguire, an innovative architect from the UK, who specialises in designing environmentally conscious buildings, was so inspired by the new Bolivian government that for the last three years she has been working there in the fields of low cost housing, and providing access to safe drinking water and sanitation.

Jo and her business partner, Enrique Canzan, are starting up a business called Agua y Energía (Water and Energy) to provide help to low income families in the barrios and the countryside. They also live in the Maria Auxiliadora community that was started 10 years ago by a woman called Rose Mary Irusta on collectively owned land.

Jo & Enrique are building two small houses within the community, with the same sort of budget that might be available to people in many of the barrios of South America. The difference is these small houses will be the practical inspiration, to show people in the community that green principles really work. Changing how people do things like build a house takes more than just talk, people need to see it working and understand that it's affordable & safe for their families.

The house Jo is building uses Adobe bricks of sun dried earth. Adobe building has been around for thousands of years in Bolivia & is the perfect solution as a green building material. Jo explained that many of the residents of the community are indigenous people who have immigrated from the countryside, they are against using Adobe as a building material because of the threat of vinchucas. These insects carry a parasite that produces an often fatal disease that attacks your respiratory & digestive system and can live in the cracks of the walls & roofs. Getting rid of vinchucas can be overcome by making the walls & ceilings smooth by plastering and making sure that people know that it's the cracks in walls that vinchucas live in and not the Adobe bricks.

A big challenge is converting people in the barrios to use a baño seco (dry toilet). Using the baño seco means that all the waste stays on site to be composted and does not end up contaminating the rivers. If the whole community at Maria Auxiliadora composted all their waste the whole soil structure would be changed and fertilised, barren hillsides could become covered with trees.

Having had a urine separating toilet myself in the UK I know a lot about peoples prejudices with environmental technologies - people really need to be able to experience all aspects of these green technologies to appreciate them.

Jo's little house already has its foundations & only needs 1500 Adobe bricks. We helped Jo & Clemente, Demasio and Eulogio, the builders, to prepare some of the dry adobe bricks.

It's hard work turning & trimming the bricks in the sun, but also rewarding to be part of this green revolution.

Climate change is having a profound effect in Bolivia, particularly on water resources, leaving many poor people without a water supply. The new green house will help show ordinary Bolivians that they can use appropriate water and sanitation technologies have clean water & look after the Patcha Mama (earth mother) at the same time.

The Bolivians living in the community are some of the strongest & most determined people I have ever met, women think nothing of carrying a full gas canister on their backs together with the shopping & their baby as they keep up a steady pace on the steep mountain paths that connects the community.

In one of the emails from Jo before we arrived she said it's easy to find where I live - just ask anyone for the gringita when you get off the trufi in Sivingani. I realise that now we are the three grintitas and most people think we all look the same and often mistake us for Jo. I had expected that people would stare or crowd round us being the only Europeans in the community, but these are reserved respectful mountain people who always say 'good day' and who's quiet manner, incredible strength & determination will soon make the María Auxiliadora housing project an inspiration for the whole of Bolivia.

Being a flower essence producer & therapist in the UK one of the most interesting aspects of any landscape is seeing which wild plants naturally grow round people's back yards. For me this information is a pointer to what is going on with the people living there. One of the plants that hung by the road sides of the community is the intense blue & purple Morning Glory. As we travel into the wealthier north of the city and then back to the barrios I noticed these flowers definitely preferred the barrio communities.

I had used the Morning Glory flower essence myself from another essence producer, now seeing it grow in the wild I really wanted to make it myself. Having been in the barrios for almost 3 weeks I could see many sides of the Morning Glory flower essence picture being played out by events in the community. Part of the Morning Glory flower essence picture is of a plant that helps people restore their natural energy so they do not have to rely on stimulants to gain strength and can overcome addictions. This flower essence would also help people feel proud of them selves and would help people who had suffered abuse in society as well as manage their addictions.

I had met many of the indigenous people who mostly populate the community, I had also observed the builders working for Jo chewing coca leaves each day to stimulate their bodies into performing hard physical work. Bolivia has a history of abuse and many of the wealthy more Spanish looking Bolivians have treated indigenous Bolivians as second-class citizens for the last five hundred years, originally expecting them to work as slaves and more recently as servants for very little money. Things are now changing, the first ever indigenous President, Evo Morales, has brought in new optimism and self respect.

If after reading this article you would like to trial the Morning Glory essence send an email to christine@saskiasfloweressences.com We have 50 bottles that we are giving away. You can also read more about this and other trials on www.saskiasfloweressences.com

If you would like to get involved in supporting *Agua y Energía* contact Jo Maguire. It is

also possible to volunteer helping build community facilities in the María Auxiliadora Community, living with a local family. Whatever your skills you will have a wonderful time and will help bring positive change to the lives of low-income Bolivians.

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Article written by Christine Felce 4th May 2011