

Contributing to the future of El Alto, Bolivia

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The city of El Alto, La Paz, Bolivia is located at 3800 meters above sea level. This is higher than most mountain peaks in the Eastern United States. Some could say that it is at an altitude people are not meant to live in. On a typical morning the blinding sun, low oxygen levels and the bitter cold makes you wonder how difficult life must be for the local inhabitants generally called *Alteños*.

Moving around El Alto is a piercing experience for the senses. You get to hear the noise from the minibuses fighting to get to the next possible passenger. You step on fetid puddles as you walk down crowded streets and weave through the maze of heavy traffic avoiding collisions with other pedestrians and vehicles. The decaying leftovers of fruit markets and food stalls fill the air with a sweet and sour smell typical of any Latin-American farmer's market. That is what most of El Alto's "La Ceja" region looks like, a vast market area, unorganized and informal.

Surprisingly, other areas in El Alto look barren and desolate. Along the dirt roads, trash is cornered against the walls, and stray dogs lazily lay in the morning sun.

Not many of the buildings in El Alto are complete. Most are more than 3 stories high but usually only the first two floors are finished. Some say to avoid taxes; others say it's "cultural". In either case, the exposed brick adds to El Alto's already unfinished look.

For outsiders, the city of El Alto appears bleak, unfortunate and inhospitable but for *Alteños* this city is home. They have gotten used to the environment and living conditions and keep the city energetic and full of life through commercial activity. The markets are open early in the morning and you see people constantly on the move.

The children of El Alto grow up around the noise, dust, and chaos. Many of them spend their early years around their mothers who work six or seven days a week. A few years later they find themselves surviving in the unfriendly environment on their own. Some take up a trade like shoe shining and others work on minibuses screaming out destinations to the crowds.

It is in this city that Obra Kolping Bolivia (OKB) set up its operations for the La Paz area in November 1983.

OKB's aim is to develop individuals who can convert their community and society into a better place.

Groups of *Alteños* formed Kolping families to learn new skills, socialize, and pray. One of these families recognized the need for a children's nursery to accommodate parent's work schedules. This nursery, located in the Santiago II section of El Alto, soon evolved into a kindergarten facility. Suddenly the small project intended for a few children had turned into one of OKB's major project areas: Education.

The Santiago II facility grew so rapidly that classrooms were haphazardly added to the existing building in order to accommodate more children.



The education project was restructured in 1993 to improve the service provided to the school children. An improved system to teach reading and writing skills was developed and implemented successfully by teachers like Elba Leñaño.



Teacher Elba Leñaño and her students

Due to the need for childcare in the Ciudad Satellite sector of El Alto a separate nursery was opened there. This center also developed into a small school serving pre-school to 4th grade. Gregoria Torrico was hired as a teacher and is now the director for this center.

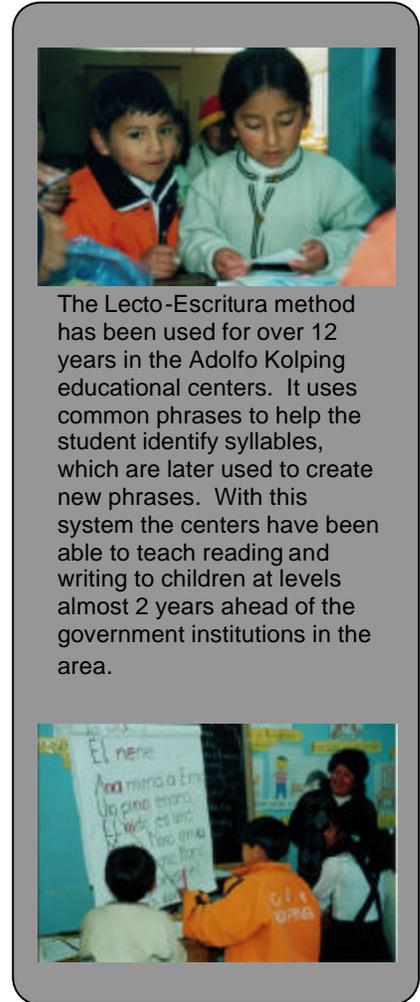
In 1995 OKB was granted permission by the Education Ministry to teach up to 8th grade. By this time, the number of students in the Santiago II center had grown over 350 making it very difficult to continue with the existing infrastructure. For this reason, OKB opened a new

center in the Villa Dolores sector in 1997. This center was still not adequate because it was housed inside a building, which was not designed to be a school. OKB's Executive Director, Juan Carlos Mattos, and his staff worked hard to improve the facilities. Thanks to the donations from Kolping International, and Kolping Switzerland, the construction of new facilities was started in 1999. The results of the efforts of OKB, Kolping Switzerland and many individuals have culminated in the opening of the new Adolfo Kolping Educational Center in Villa Dolores on February 2000.

The new center is located where the previous building once stood. The old building was torn down and a well-designed and finished structure was erected. The building has three stories of adequately sized classrooms, each one named after cities in Switzerland, Germany, and Bolivia. It has white walls, red-tiled floors, and many windows that give a bright and sunny appearance to all classrooms. I visited the Computer and Chemistry labs but unfortunately they are still quite empty with only a few refurbished computers and homemade chemistry sets. The new facility also has a nice open area for sports and a spacious theater.



Outside view of the Adolfo Kolping Educational center in Villa Dolores



The Lecto-Escritura method has been used for over 12 years in the Adolfo Kolping educational centers. It uses common phrases to help the student identify syllables, which are later used to create new phrases. With this system the centers have been able to teach reading and writing to children at levels almost 2 years ahead of the government institutions in the area.



OKB has earned public recognition thanks

to the pleasant facilities at Villa Dolores, the trust generated by OKB's educational program and the lowest private school tuition in El Alto. The Adolph Kolping educational centers provide students with an excellent level of education, an environment that nurtures family values, and a place to escape the bleak appearance of the surrounding streets.

After visiting all three centers and spending time with the directors and students I sensed the energy, happiness and hope that permeates the inside of classrooms. I can even understand the enormous pride people like Alex Cossio (Administrative Manager), Mary Aguirre (Academic director), and of course Juan Carlos Mattos (Executive Director) have of their educational program. It provides a bright present and an even brighter future for the children of El Alto.

