

## June and July: Learning to Dance

*Two months ago I was told one night that it might be better not to wear my torn and muddy running shoes to go out and was quickly loaned a pair of cute white shoes. I jammed my wide feet (thanks dad) into the white shoes and admired them from afar, yes, the muddy running shoes had to go. I walked in the new tennis shoes that night and continued using them to walk around the city the following day. Around noon the pain was so bad that unfortunately for those around me, every time I had the chance to sit down I would take off my shoes. That afternoon instead of walking around the plaza, enjoying the sun, I decided to take the train home because I didn't want to spend any more time in shoes that were not my own; shoes that were not letting me walk freely or fully experience the world around me.*

*I began to think of these "shoes" as symbolic our own chains, which bind us from running freely, and make us walk with a limp. For many these "shoes" reflect the inequalities present in this world such as: shoes of hunger, violence, drugs, lack of shelter, cold, poor education, the list goes on. For others these shoes (chains) represent current values in today's society: wealth, success, and perfection.*

*How often do we wear "shoes" that cripple us rather than let us run freely? How do we break out of these shoes when the pain finally dulls, we build calluses, and our feet and bodies become numbed to the restriction of walking in shoes too small; shoes which do not allow us to love freely and fully experience life in community?*

*One of my first memories this year from Providencia is of a boy named Brian. Throughout the year we developed a strong bond, and looking back, we walked together on very different paths, from very different places, but on a similar journey which would eventually end in the loosening of shoes, or the breaking of chains, giving us the wiggle room to dance.*

I clearly remember the day I met Brian. It was my first day at Providencia and we were celebrating Kids Day (el dia del nino). I was feeling overwhelmed by it all: The large amount of people, the precarious surroundings, the laughter, movement, and noise; I remember feeling awkward and inept with my clumsy Spanish and the little knowledge I had about the community center, Argentine culture, and the volunteers, kids, and adults who surrounded me. At one point in the afternoon Brian came up to me and tapped me on the leg. I bent down and was met by a 10 year old boy with a thin, serious face, baggy clothing, and a haunted stare. He looked at me, put his sister's hand in mine and said very seriously, *take care of her*. I would later find out that Brian and his family had recently moved from a large *villa* or shantytown to barrio Providencia, a smaller *villa*. Maybe Brian had similar feelings to my own in this new context. Feelings of being overwhelmed, not sure of who to trust, feelings of awkwardness and vulnerability. Would we find our own niche within this community of Providencia? In the future would we be able to step through the front gate and feel a sense of community, of safety? How would our shoes be loosened in this place, making room for growth, allowing us to move a bit more freely?

As I mentioned in previous letters, Murga is a type of dance (with acting and songs throughout the presentation) used to challenge the injustices within society. Every Saturday at Providencia we rehearsed murga and often traveled to other community centers to perform. I remember one of the first performances I witnessed. We arrived in the back of a fruit truck, all 40 of us, sore from all of the bumps along the way, but buzzing with excitement. We got out of the truck and began to paint the kids' faces to prepare for the dance. Brian asked me to take his picture after his face was painted (attached). When I look at this picture now I see a small boy with hunched shoulders and reserved eyes, yet with the hint of a smile on his face, I can see a spark of excitement, of wonder and adventure. In his eyes I also see myself, still hesitant, still trying to understand this new world around me, yet with the knowledge and excitement that this place and year would change me. I remember watching Brian dance for the first time on this day. A dance in which incorporates large, free arm movements, kicking, and jumping, and open facial expressions of joy, passion, and rebellion to represent breaking the chains of



slavery ; Brian was dancing with still, slouched arms, eyes to the ground, rocking back and forth to the beat. I was on the side , watching, feeling surrounded by the beat of the drum, wanting to join in this dance of justice and freedom, but also just rocking back and forth to the beat. We were both still wearing shoes which did not let us dance freely. I was trapped by not wanting to fail, trapped by the values of our society which often repress the expression of our souls in turn for success, perfection, and order. I imagine that Brian was trapped by very different shoes. Shoes of hunger and violence, in a world a in which society tells him daily, you are not important, you are forgotten.

As the months continued, Brian continued coming to Providencia. He would always walk in, shyly give me a hug, and quietly say, “hola Cris.” He began to bring his backpack to tutoring time and after a while, started to ask for help when he didn’t understand something. He started to PLAY! I remember one day there were around 10 kids climbing the wrong way on an already broken slide, we continued unsuccessfully to ask them to use the slide “correctly” yet the ringing of play and laughter drowned out our voices. At one point after I had asked them to at least go feet-first, Brian went down head first, arms stretched out, stood up, and looked at me with an open, mischievous, and joyous smile. I couldn’t help but laugh and return his fierce hug. Brian was not silent anymore. Maybe going down headfirst on a slide was not the safest way to begin to discover his voice, but it was a beginning . I also continued my own journey of trying to live from the inside out rather than the outside in and in this journey discovered a change in my relationships. In focusing less on success and perfection, and in trying to live more genuinely I began to find my place within this community and started to feel the love , support, and acceptance that comes from living within true community. Through the love and acceptance I encountered, I began to find my own voice.

In June we danced the murga one last time before winter break (the seasons are opposite). At one point in the dance everyone makes a circle and groups of two or three go to the middle and dance. I had started dancing in Jan, and was still intimidated by this part of the dance. Often when I was in the center I thought about how I was dancing rather than just letting myself dance. Brian was a part of one of the first groups to step in the circle. As I watched him I was filled with inspiration, love, and strength. He was dancing! Arms and legs in all directions, torso free and open, eyes up, huge smile, and his cheeks were GLOWING, it took my breath away. He danced with freedom, joy, rebellion, and strength. When I stepped into the circle I let the joy and inspiration that I felt from watching Brian help me to dance with that same freedom. In this year this place which once was unknown and strange created a space for us within its community. In this community, the shoes which constrained us were loosened and we learned to dance Murga, a dance of breaking the chains which imprison us to allow us to more freely walk a journey of expression, justice, love, and freedom.



*I am on my front porch at home as I finish up this newsletter (late as usual). As I safely sit outside, listening to music , enjoying a cup of tea and, and breathing in the air of freshly cut grass and summer flowers, my mind drifts to Brian. Is he hungry? Has it rained , changing his dirt floor to mud? Is he cold? Was he kept up last night by noises of violence, by fear? Brian and I both loosened our shoes this year and in doing so were able to dance with freedom and joy. However, the chains of poverty, hunger, and violence continue to be a reality present in Brian’s life, and the world. Despite having a place to go to like Providencia where he is not forgotten, where his voice is heard, Brian along with 1.062 billion others ([www.worldvision.org](http://www.worldvision.org)) will go to bed hungry, constricted by the shoes (chains) of poverty, shoes they never chose to wear, with burdens no ONE should have to bear. WE are called to walk in community with one another to actively seek justice in this world. However, we cannot walk this path to the best of our ability, or walk at all, if the shoes in which we walk oppress and constrict us. We must look inside of ourselves to begin to understand the chains which prevent us from loving fully in community. I believe that as we seek to break the chains of success, perfection, and individualism, our gaze will turn outward. It is with this outward gaze that we begin freely to dance the murga; a dance which exposes the brokenness of this world and challenges us to walk in community, openly loving, listening, and sharing ourselves and our resources.*

