

## **VOLUNTEERING IN ARGENTINA**

**By Gil Rabbie**

The Argentinean economic crisis of 2000-2001 was well publicised at the time. Most people will be aware of the currency devaluation which led to a large increase in the levels of unemployment and leaving many people in a state of severe poverty. Today with the crisis no longer a headline feature, one would be forgiven for thinking that the country had recovered. Alas, this is hardly the case. The Argentine Peso has devalued some 400% in the past 5 years; inflation is at around 41% and unemployment near 30%. About half the population are considered to be living below the poverty line with about a quarter of these not even managing to afford basic foodstuffs.

What differentiated the Argentinean economic crisis was its disproportionate effect on the middle class population. Argentine society, particularly in the capital region, had always had a fairly even spread of economic classes from the very wealthy to the extremely poor and everything in between. Today as the effect of the crisis surfaces it is clear that the middle classes have been deeply affected with many of them no longer able to afford the basic cost of living.

Due to its largely middle class make-up, the Jewish community of Argentina was disproportionately affected by the crisis. Thousands have lost jobs and savings. Elderly people are particularly vulnerable with state pensions so low, they cannot reasonably provide for themselves, particularly if regular medications are required. The Jewish community in Argentina today numbers some 200,000 mostly in the region of Greater Buenos Aires. Over the last ten years some 100,000 members who wanted and were able to emigrate, have moved mainly to Israel but also to countries such as Canada and Spain. The community dates back to the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when a large influx of east European, mainly Russian Jews, fled the pogroms to start new lives elsewhere. The community has always led a vibrant life with strong communal organisations in place to support the people. The terrorist attacks on the Israeli embassy (1992) and the AMIA community centre (1994) came as a severe blow to a society already under attack from anti-Semitism. A failure to bring the perpetrators to justice till today has been seen by most people as further proof of government corruption and a divisive cover-up.

World Jewish Relief (WJR) was founded in 1933 and is the main overseas aid arm of the UK Jewish community, providing basic welfare support in the form of food, medication, fuel and aid on the ground. The organisation's recent merge with World Jewish Aid has added a non-Sectarian dimension to the work they do as an enabling organization; helping both individuals and communities alike, to survive and thrive. "Time for Life" is WJR's volunteer programme, which aims to provide direct humanitarian aid to some of the communities in greatest need which would benefit from personnel on the ground.

Having successfully completed my undergraduate studies in chemical engineering at Imperial and due to start full-time employment in my field soon after, I was looking for a challenging, exciting and productive way to spend some time abroad, that would benefit both myself and others alike. I was fortunate to have been selected for the Time for Life

programme in Argentina, which appeared to offer just that, together with a stimulating opportunity to apply the Spanish I had been studying for some 2 years now as a university elective, in a real life setting. Within 2 months of my final exam I found myself, together with a co-volunteer, on a flight to Buenos Aires, which would be our home for the next 3-4 months.

On the face of it, in many areas, the Buenos Aires of today appears almost untainted. However, it is no longer the “Paris of south America” as it used be described 20 years ago, but a typical city of its continent – where the gap between rich and poor is large, and widening. Shanty town neighbourhoods are commonplace and begging is widespread.

Our project would involve a number of different social-work, education and physical support activities over a full-time schedule that would keep us very busy indeed. Our local contacts on the ground were from WJR’s partner organisation - the American Joint Distribution Committee, who have been extremely involved in co-ordinating a response to the social and economic problems since the very beginning of the crisis.

One of the key activities we were involved in was teaching English in a local job centre. The centre was established to help people that in light of the economic climate in the country, had found themselves either unemployed or unable to enter the job market for the first time. Our role was to assist students in gaining the essential skill of English as a foreign language, to make them more attractive to potential employers. Not having ever taught English systematically nor worked with adult students, the challenge was to keep the students engaged and find the appropriate level for each person. We began a series of additional one-to-one tuition classes for those students that felt they would benefit from some extra help, which was very warmly received. Other education work I was involved in, was private tuition to a girl from a poverty stricken family. She had managed to enter the public university system to study medicine, but was struggling to make progress with her mathematics and chemistry studies, particularly as she lived in small 2-bedroom flat with her two parents and 5 siblings. With my own engineering background I felt comfortable providing private tuition which helped her to pass her first year examinations.

Our social work activities were focused primarily on two groups: young children and the elderly. With the latter, we worked closely with local community “social action centres” to organise activities and outings for members as well as community dinners, on special occasions. I was also involved in home visits to an elderly gentleman, who had numerous health, economic and family problems. Offering him unconditional companionship in the form of a friendly chat each week, helped him to focus on the positive things in his life. We also worked in the so-called “Baby Help Centre”, an initiative established to assist parents of very young children, experiencing financial issues. The centre provides a play-group facility, professional advisory services, monthly provisions - assistance packages and critically, the support of other parents like themselves. Our role was to assist wherever necessary whether directly involved with the children or by re-organising their store-room for more efficient stock control.

Other physical support activities involved assisting in the local “Roperos” or clothes-distribution services, where second-hand clothes donations were collected, categorised and then re-distributed to those in need. Another initiative – the central pharmacy, did the same thing with pharmaceutical donations. Drugs were collected from donor individuals and organisations, re-classified by expiry date etc and distributed monthly, to social action centres across the country where they were given gratis, generally to people suffering from chronic illnesses. The regular pensioner volunteers would joke that being young, quick and nimble we were able to sort the entire stock they would have completed in a whole day, in a mere hour!

Finally, one of the most challenging and rewarding activities we were a part of, was aimed at children from one of Buenos Aires’ largest shanty towns. Born into some of the worst levels of poverty imaginable, these are children who given the country’s current political and economic situation will probably, unfortunately also find it very difficult to ever escape it. The project intension was to give these children, many of whom do not work or attend school, some basic computing skills which would hopefully inspire them to more – perhaps an education or a job. Over the 8 week period we saw an interesting and unexpected transformation in many within the group from boisterous and unruly to receptive and appreciative. We realised that basic values of discipline, civility and respect were not something they had been taught in the past nor did they require in their present lives, but were fully aware of the need to learn in order to create change in their lives.

The project period ended much sooner than expected and before we knew it was time to say goodbye to all the wonderful people we had met and return home. I had had an incredible time and gained an enormous amount. It had certainly been worth my while, but had I given as much as I had gained? The nature of charity work is such, that there is always so much more that needs to be done, than any one person can offer. Instead, I focused on the individuals, whose lives I may have touched. The smiles, where in the past they would have been sad. The thanks and appreciation where in the past they may have felt angry and alone. That was the legacy that stayed behind in Argentina.

The success of WJR and the Time for Life programme is a testament to the commitment of its volunteers and generosity of its donors. If you are interested in either, or would simply like more information, please contact: [gil.rabbie@gmail.com](mailto:gil.rabbie@gmail.com)



English class at the Ariel Job Centre



Working at the Baby Help Centre



Computer Classes with Children from the local Shanty Town



Classifying pharmaceutical donations at the “Farmacia Central”



My Chemistry & Maths student at the San Martin Social Action Centre