

**Rotary Ambassadorial Scholarship
Required First Report**

In the past several months, I have had an amazing experience in La Paz, Bolivia. I had no idea what to expect when I came but I honestly can say that I feel like this is my home now. I have lived in foreign countries before, but now I feel like I am here with so much purpose and that I am learning so much just by living in this fascinating city at such an important time with so much change. Between my Rotary activities, my university classes and my internship at a Bolivian NGO, I've gotten a wide variety of perspectives on the current political situation and the Bolivian civil society in general. In this way, I feel that my personal life is always intrinsically tied up within my academic and career interests. Furthermore, Bolivian people have such a strong political consciousness—it seems like everybody knows so much about the current situation and has very deep seated opinion—I am having interesting conversations all the time and people are usually excited to teach me about their experiences and perceptions here.

In the past couple of months Bolivia has gotten a lot of international press because of the political and social situation in the country. As the poorest country in South America, economic resources are scarce in Bolivia. Furthermore, there is a great deal of inequality among the very diverse population. For centuries, the indigenous sections of the population that live primarily in the countryside and speak languages other than Spanish have been kept outside the productive economic system. A very small elite class has controlled the political system and economic decisions. In recent years, groups of indigenous farmers, miners, and others from around the country have formed a powerful unity to peacefully demonstrate with roadblocks and urban protests against a political system that does not represent them and makes choices with natural resources that do not contribute to the good of the country as a whole.

These protests have taken place intermittently over the course of my stay here. The most severe and well-publicized incidents occurred during the end of May and beginning of June. Finally, the president of Bolivia, Carlos Mesa, resigned, as demanded by the protesting groups and things in La Paz returned to normalcy very quickly. Right now the country has an interim president, Eduardo Rodriguez, the former head of the Supreme Court and he is organizing new elections and a Constituent Assembly for the end of the year. Hopefully those processes will occur peacefully and in a form that makes all sectors of the populations feel fairly represented.

Personally, while the city of La Paz has been tense at times and it certainly was frustrating when much of the city was shut down for several weeks due to the political protestors marching in the streets and blockading the transport of food and gas, I feel very lucky to have lived in this city during this time. My classes were cancelled for two weeks and I had a hard time getting to my office because taxis stopped running, but I felt safe the entire time. My apartment is on the opposite side of the city from the mass of the protestors and I have a very strong support system here between my Rotary contacts, my classmates and other friends.

Academically, I've been pleasantly surprised with the quality of my classes and my program in general. At the beginning, I felt quite frustrated with the lack of organization and undefined schedule of the program. The beginning of my classes was

postponed a week to allow more students to enroll and the university system here seems to be much less financially stable than programs in the United States. After I got enrolled and the classes began, however, I found that the classes and my classmates were very interesting. What initially attracted me to the program was that it fit perfectly within my previous course of study. It is a masters program in philosophy and political science within a postgraduate school specializing in Latin American and Bolivian development at the Universidad Mayor de San Andrés.

The classes are organized along a schedule of five-week blocks, with only one class at a time. So far, we have completed our first three modules in Theories of Development, Political Economy, and Classical Political Thought. Classes only meet at nights, seven to ten pm, because many of the students are professionals with full time jobs. That has allowed for some very interesting conversations in class since many of them are lawyers or work for the government. Our professors have also been quite interesting; a couple of them are very prominent and have held important posts in the government.

I've found that the Spanish has gotten easier for me every day and at this point I can express almost anything I need to in written or spoken Spanish. This was a big reason I chose La Paz because I knew that it was a city without too many English speaking people. In general, Bolivians have been very happy to get to know me and generally very understand when I make mistakes with language. For my first couple of classes, I hired a Spanish tutor to edit my essays, but at this point I feel confident enough to do all the work myself as long as I am vigilant and take the time to edit my work. Between my internship and my classes, my workload is large, but manageable and I find time to enjoy the many cultural resources that La Paz has to offer.

My Rotary involvement so far has been completely within the city of La Paz because of travel difficulties and the club's desire to have me wait until a new president is established before I officially present to them. Upon my arrival to La Paz, I met with my host counselor German Terrazas Rovira during the first week and he has been very helpful in serving as an intermediary between myself and my university, banks and other institutions in the city, especially early on when I did not know all the words in Spanish to explain what my scholarship was about and what my needs were. I've developed a good friendship with Dr. Terrazas, his wife, his daughter, and his son-in-law (another Rotarian) and they have advised me well about navigating the city of La Paz and fulfilling my Rotary responsibilities. When my parents came to visit last week, Dr. Terrazas invited us to his house for a formal dinner. We had a very positive cultural exchange and at the end of the night my brain was quite tired from translating between my parents and the Terrazas family, who speak very little English. My parents also told me that they were happy to meet the man that is charged with looking over me while I am living here in this slightly unstable time for the country.

In an ambassadorial capacity, I have attended several meetings of my host club in the neighborhood of Miraflores and gotten to know many of the members of that club. For several weeks, due to the lack of transportation and the general uncertainty in La Paz, the club did not meet, and now that they are reconvening, they are undergoing a change of president. Presently, I have an agreement with Dr. Terrazas and the Miraflores club to give my official presentation on July 21 at their homecoming dinner. We are also working on scheduling presentations with the other six clubs in La Paz for the immediate

Brian Palmer-Rubin
Rotary Ambassadorial Acholar, La Paz, Bolivia

future. Assuming that the political situation remains calm in the country, I plan to visit clubs in at least three other major Bolivian cities over the next several months. Dr. Terrazas has agreed to help me contact clubs in the cities of Sucre, Santa Cruz, and Cochabamba where I hope to visit to experience the Bolivian culture and the Rotary presence in its varied forms. Recently, another opportunity has come up as I have been contacted by a member of another San Diego Rotary club about coordinating with Rotary in La Paz on a water project in the surrounding Altiplano region. I have spoken with Dr. Terrazas and other Rotarians of my club to help create a bridge between my two regions of Rotary presence: San Diego and La Paz. I sincerely hope that this project comes to fruition during my stay here so that I can participate in a bilateral project of community service that is much needed in this region of the country.

So far my travel within Bolivia has been confined to the department of La Paz because of my demanding school schedule and the travel difficulty in the country. Attached to this report are digital photos of Tiwanaku, the main site of prehistoric ruins for the pre-Inca people who once lived in the Lake Titicaca region. There are photographs of the town of Coroico, the seat of the North Yungas, a jungle region three hours from the city of La Paz that can only be reached by what is advertised as the most dangerous road in the world. I have been quite impressed with the varied climates that exist within an immediate vicinity of the city of La Paz. The temperature and climate can change dramatically in a short drive and the views of the mountains, Lake Titicaca, the jungle and the urban landscape make a breathtaking combination.

I would very much like to thank Judy and Mel Gallegos, Mil Phillip, and Philippe Lamoise and the entire district of San Diego Rotary for the opportunity to have this amazing experience and for all of the activities that they helped me participate in before leaving San Diego. Because my school year did not start until February, I was able to get to know my sponsor club, the Poway club of San Diego, quite well, and I attended several of their meetings, two San Diego District Conferences, and the District Seminar during my senior year at Pomona College. Through all of these events and my personal relationships with Judy and Mel, I felt that I was well-prepared to represent Rotary San Diego as an Ambassadorial Scholar here in La Paz.

Finally, Natalia Bonfante Ginez at the main office of the Ambassadorial Scholarship program has been incredibly helpful in all of my arrangements as a scholar both before I came and since I have lived here. When in San Diego, I had some difficulties contacting my host university and arranging some of my travel plans because of the lack of structure here in La Paz, but Ms. Ginez' flexibility and support allowed me to arrange everything and at this point I can not imagine things working out any better than they have. In general, I am very thankful for this opportunity and I sincerely feel that the Rotary Ambassadorial Scholarship program has provided me a perfect framework in which to experience a new culture in a variety of ways with a support structure of interesting and generous Rotarians, both in my sponsor and in my host district.