

## Bolivia Trip Report – 25-30 October 2010

### Semillas de Bendicion, Tarija, Bolivia

<b>Participants</b>	Suzanne Schultz	Programme Director Five Talents USA
	Mckenzie Butler	Programme Assistant Five Talents USA
	Stan Kriz	Volunteer with Five Talents USA
	John Hunter	Volunteer with Five Talents UK

<b>Objectives:</b>	To support project leaders Eva & Sara, their team & clients
	To enhance governance & structure of Semillas
	To build up the role of Mckenzie as main Five Talents contact
	To heighten Five Talents' profile at trade fair for small business
	To strengthen links with Five Talents UK & USA

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We met up in El Alto, La Paz, the world's highest international airport at 3850m, situated in a stunning setting with a backdrop of snow-clad mountains. American Airlines lost Mckenzie's bag and she was without it until she passed through La Paz on the way home.

**Background:** with the support of Association of Evangelical Churches of Tarija, Sara & Eva Mamami (pictured left and right) coordinate and implement the programme, which currently has 32 savings groups and about 300 clients, with 18 groups formed in 2010. The other groups have been going for up to two years. The annual budget is \$35,000 split between salaries, transport, training and materials and admin overheads – funded by Five Talents. 14 people have so far been trained as group leaders out of a target of 20. The role played by Tom Waddell (SAMS-USA and Five Talents) in getting it going was warmly appreciated.



As well as business training content, Eva and Sara always try to incorporate further elements such as home management, health and school.

### Programme Theme 1: The Groups

The first full day started with an introductory meeting with S&E, reviewing progress to date and getting to know each other. We took a bus for 3 hours out into the countryside N of Tarija to Chayasa, through stunning scenery. Much of the landscape is arid but Chayasa lies in a fertile valley where onions & carrots grow well, even though it is obvious the river used to flow much more strongly. There are 5 rural groups, 2 in Chayasa itself (one is for children), 2 in Camasnovio and one in Montesur which meets after Sunday school and since water is scarce it includes a health component for children. Chayasa has been partly rebuilt with Govt money & we think also an outside NGO. We stayed in the Pastor's house. His wife makes pottery and baskets (pictured below).



We attended the varied children's meeting for about 20 children for whom there is a savings programme, some of whom had walked 2 hours to be there. There was a DVD Bible story of Moses, puppets delivering an amusing savings message (the kids are saving for Christmas toys), plus a craft activity making piggy-banks which we all joined in. The solar lamps from ToughStuff came in really useful during a power cut when they were the only source of light! (see handheld light - pictured right). These and the solar panel charging units have not all been distributed as S&E prefer to keep them back to offer as incentives to the trainers.



Almost without a gap the adults' meeting began, with a very funny sketch where two fruit & veg stall-holders put over their very different attitudes to customers & how to display their wares, sell their produce, make deals etc. This was far more effective than simply telling folk how to do it. There was also a healthy eating component based round soya, how to use it as a cooking material instead of meat, how good it is and then it was shared out. The meeting concluded with collecting the money (savings) and making the entries in the books, those of the 9 who couldn't attend had given their 10 Bolivianos' share to someone else to bring along. There was almost a ritualistic feeling to this which I hadn't expected, including a prayer for wisdom for the person chosen this session to take and use the money. It is a traditional ROSCA programme – Rotating Savings and Credit Association – where each member of the group saves the same amount, and one person takes the jackpot each session. This time it was Carlos (pictured), who has no family & has now given himself whole-heartedly to the group and the savings scheme.



It was clear that the approach is integrated around the 3 levels: family, business & community. Sara & Eva are a delight to see in action and share considerable affection with their client communities. Back in Tarija we enjoyed several team-building lunches & dinners.

We visited two further sites on the fringes of Tarija. One was a Quechua-speaking women's group, though they spoke Spanish when we were in earshot. Again this comprised elements of Bible study and nutrition (kids can eat there for 4 Bols a week) as well as the collection of

the money and we were very graciously received. The base for this group is an ‘Asembleos de Dios’ church under Pastor Jose Luis.

The group, the only one in this district, has 10 members, 6 were present, several of whom are on their 3<sup>rd</sup> cycle and 4 of those who started the group off are still members. They save Bols 110 per week between them despite some having had poor experience with other groups. Advice is given on household expenditure, this session concentrated on how to reduce monthly outgoings (other than rent) from Bols 760 to 740 by economising under each of 8 cost headings, heart-breaking stuff when you consider how little they already live off. I talked in particular to Alejandrina (pictured, second from left) who bought supplies in bulk to resell in the market and has seen her life improve considerably.



The children’s group was lively and varied, with a sweet soup to keep them fed. S&E brought this along in a pot which they’d kept warm in an insulated bag. Mckenzie asked some of the kids questions which Stan recorded while I played football with the others.

### **Programme Theme 2: Governance**

Building on the team mealtimes we enjoyed, there were several concentrated sessions held around strengthening governance & structure of the Supervisory Board. Stan & I stayed out of the first one so as not to overload people still getting to know each other, but I shared the translation role with Mckenzie during the second as she was understandably tiring by then. It seems that Viva Bolivia – a consultancy with an office in Cochabamba may be used to help establish Semillas de Bendicione on a more formal basis.

### **Programme Theme 3: The Fair**

Culmination of several months’ preparations, this community event went under the flag of the Evangelical Churches of Tarija with the support of the Mayor who provided the booths for the stalls. About 20 of these were erected attractively around the central hub Parque Bolivar, slightly more than half being Five Talents’ clients. There were several speeches and entertainment. A few other Christian NGOs working in the town were represented, which showed a good level of collaboration. Five Talents had a lovely stall, with the usual slogans customised in Spanish with local photo examples of the work.



The message was that the Church is interested in every part of people’s lives and there is no need for mistrust of business, much in line with what Eva & Sara had been explaining elsewhere during our stay. There were many opportunities to explain the work of Semillas and the role of FT, I must admit I really enjoyed this bit! Mckenzie & I conducted interviews

with stall-holders which Stan recorded, one whom sticks in my mind is Patricia who makes cakes to sell, along with a few panuelos. She has seven children whom she is better able to care for now, and said by mid-afternoon when I interviewed she'd done Bols 400 worth of business that day, v impressive volume at at Bols 1.00 to 1.50 per unit.

### **Conclusion**

All in all a very enjoyable & useful trip which saw already strong relationships reinforced and new ones forged. Above all, it answered my underlying question: why are we here, in an obscure corner of Bolivia, involved with a small-scale project which lacks critical mass? Answer: we're supporting Eva & Sara and their deep sense of God's calling in their community, with the encouragement of their equally committed Supervisory Committee which will benefit greatly from the services of Viva Bolivia, as & when they are hired.



Thanks for allowing me to represent Five Talents UK !!

John Hunter, 14 Nov 2010