

International charity with a personal touch

Airline Ambassadors ask what is needed locally, deliver it themselves, and arrange for follow-up.

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La Paz, Bolivia - Angelita Jura sits on the bed in her one-room home here, her head full of the things she wants to say to her visitors. She is tiny and weighs no more than 80 pounds. She is infirm, her hands and legs affected by disease, but an urgency lights her face: "I had a job before I got sick," she says through a translator. "I want to work again."

On this early November afternoon, Ms. Jura has many visitors. The nonprofit organization Airline Ambassadors International has sent a group of six Americans (including this writer) to deliver humanitarian aid to the poorest in Bolivia's capital.

Cut into the side of an Andean mountain valley at an altitude of 12,000 feet, La Paz is home to about 1 million people, most of them Aymara and Quechua Indians. Relatively few tourists, and even fewer resources, find their way here. Jura was identified as especially needy by local social workers, and the volunteers have traveled more than 4,000 miles to hear her story.

Bob Millonig, a Washington, D.C., patent attorney, sits next to her with his arm around her shoulders. A church volunteer tells the group that Jura can be treated medically, but not until she is better nourished. But because she cannot walk, she can no longer cook for herself. And because she has no family to help her, she eats only when people remember to bring her food. In the past, she says, she has gone four or five days without.

That's the breaking point for Mr. Millonig. "How much will it cost to buy meals from a restaurant every day and deliver them to Angelita?" he asks. "It's expensive," says the local volunteer, "around \$1 to \$2 a day."

By the end of the visit, Airline Ambassadors has agreed to donate enough money to feed Jura for three months, after which she will likely be strong enough to take treatment.

Founded by American Airlines flight attendant Nancy Rivard as a nonprofit in 1996, Airline Ambassadors International now works with thousands of volunteers to run missions in 45 countries.

"Many people want to help, but they don't know how," says Ms. Rivard by phone from her home in Moss Beach, Calif. Where many organizations rely on professional aid workers, Rivard's organization accepts anyone willing to help. "We give ordinary

people the opportunity to personally touch the lives of others; to see their money delivered," she says.

The organization began as a network of airline employees using their pass privileges to bring aid to others. Rivard expanded the program to include nonairline personnel when she discovered that delivering aid enriches the lives of both recipient and giver: "If more people had the experiences I had, they would understand viscerally we are all one; they'd understand cultural differences."

Sending volunteers, rather than simply sending money, has a double advantage, says Dwight Burlingame, associate executive director of The Center on Philanthropy at Indiana University in Indianapolis. "There's a social exchange in philanthropy, not just a monetary one," Dr. Burlingame explains. "[Sending volunteers] engages people in issues the recipients are facing. When you are engaged in a personal way, you know the issues much better, and are more apt to follow with financial support."

Volunteers pay their own way (airfare, hotel, and food), leaving valuable tourist dollars behind, and may donate cash aid during the course of their trip. They also bring expertise – patent law or dentistry, for example – that's beyond the scope of most airline employees.

Bolivian mission coordinator Paula Moran, a Wakefield, Mass. resident, spends a good part of each year scouring stores, collecting all manner of donations, and organizing volunteers. On this trip, six volunteers – ranging in age from 25 to 59 from Boston, San Francisco, and Washington, D.C. – have brought crutches, walkers, nine wheelchairs, and 12 large suitcases filled with toothbrushes, sweaters, school supplies, new shoes, and, to the delight of local audiologist Tahia Rojas, hearing aids.

The devices are completely out of reach economically for poorer residents in La Paz, where the minimum wage just went up to about \$75 a month. Tonight, the group has brought several new and refurbished hearing aids to Ms. Rojas, who is volunteering her time. Two-year-old Johann sits on his father's lap as Rojas fits the piece behind the boy's ear and softly calls his name. Johann's eyes flicker toward her. She steps behind his back and claps. Johann turns his head to look, startled. The entire room – volunteers, Rohas, the child's family – applauds.

Person by person, family by family, the group metes out aid. They climb down a rocky cliff to visit a family with five young children whose mother goes missing for two weeks at a time; money is left with a social worker to buy food for them. Another family needs extra beds: Nine people have been sleeping in two twin beds inside a 10-foot-square, unheated adobe brick room. To the children's oncology ward in La Paz's city hospital go sweaters, hats, and toys. To a program that helps street kids succeed in college, a grant of \$720 to cover an entire year's tuition in the agronomy program at Bolivia's most competitive public university.

"Bolivia is the second-poorest country in the Americas, after Haiti," says Ms. Moran. "Here, \$30 is enough to start a business on the street, selling chicken soup or toiletries. Thirty dollars can change a life in Bolivia."

Although Moran travels with cash donated by individuals and agencies, the mission also carries gifts from Americans who will likely never get to La Paz. An elder volunteer, Giesela Witzehusen of Chelsea, Mass., knits dozens of sweaters and asks Moran to take them to the children of La Paz.

"Look at the detail in these," Moran says, fingering a kitten design on a soft woolen vest. "She believes that these people deserve the best."

Once the week-long trip is finished, local Bolivian aid workers will monitor the progress of recipients. This follow-up is another aspect that makes Airline Ambassadors so important in La Paz, says Diane Bellomy, director of Hogar Mixto, a home for abandoned and abused children here. She provides oversight for the group: Is Jura improving? Is Johann wearing his hearing aid? Have the beds been delivered? The directness of the aid, Ms. Bellomy says, also makes Airline Ambassadors unique. "On earlier visits, Paula [Moran] would ask for places that needed help. I suggested deaf and mentally disabled, and Paula would typically ask, 'Can you ask what they need?' "

Founder Rivard confirms this approach: "We're not forcing something down their throats. Our rule is, we listen to what local contacts say, and try to meet their need."

Like Jura's. Her prayers for help were whispered to church volunteers, who talked with local aid workers, who mentioned her to Airline Ambassadors, who found a donated wheelchair in the States, flew it to La Paz, tracked down Jura, and placed it in her hands. As the group negotiates the crumbling cement steps from Jura's home to the clogged streets of La Paz, where minibuses whiz by, spewing diesel fumes, Jura calls after them. Her voice is small, but carries: "Please don't forget me!"