

Educational project in a marginal barrio in Uruguay

Scarcity, poverty and misery were what a group of students from Montevideo found when they started teaching catechism in the Casavalle quarter in 1995. From this experience they developed the idea of a social project to alleviate the difficulties. Two years later land and premises were obtained, and thus was born Los Pinos Educational Center.

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Los Pinos is located in a barrio marked by both difficult material conditions and widespread family disintegration. Households are frequently headed by single mothers, with incomes barely sufficient for the survival of the family at an often marginal level. Many of the area's children cannot rely on a parent in the home. Therefore, Los Pinos decided to center its activities on boys and young men, focusing on those who are good prospects for finishing school. For the most part it is a matter of getting the kids to make good use of time and stay off the street, where so much crime originates.

Luis San Martín, one of the initiative's organizers, recalls the beginnings: "In March of 1997 we

approached the owner of a 6-hectare property in the Casavalle barrio, to ask him to lend it to us to use for a social program with the neighborhood children.

"After several months of negotiations, we decided to request that he donate the property. The meeting was set for June 26 – the anniversary of the trip to heaven of Opus Dei's founder, whose spirit we want to materialize in the education we give – and lasted few minutes. The owner, who is not Christian, was very generous. We had barely proposed it to him before he agreed to donate it."

In the morning the children attend their respective schools and in the afternoon, at Los Pinos, they do their schoolwork. They also participate in other activities that aid personal development. The key is to fill the time with productive and

educational activities compatible with good school performance. They do sports, mainly soccer. They take classes in English, computers, and handicrafts. And they learn how to cultivate a garden. Some have lunch in the center and all get a snack before returning home. "Along the way," says Pablo Bartol, director of the educational center, "they not only acquire new knowledge but also have their afternoons occupied, thus avoiding the street, which exposes them to delinquency and violence."

Inauguration of a new building

The sponsors of Los Pinos wanted, on the occasion of the centennial of St. Josemaría's birth, to promote the construction of a new building that would permit them to reach more people. After three years of continuous growth, the original locale had become too small, and it had been necessary to put up the

first addition in 2000. This turned out to be inadequate, because, though it succeeded in providing a place for 90 children, requests from parents doubled that number. In June of 2001 an agreement was signed with the Rhein-Donau Stiftung, a German NGO. Aid from this foundation permitted the inauguration, on September 16, 2002, of a new building comprised of 8 workshops, offices and an extensive library. In addition, Los Pinos now offers courses in cooling systems, industrial maintenance and telecommunications to young men from 14 to 17. Already 25 students have begun the new program, and Los Pinos expects the number of participants to reach 200 in three years.

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