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A São Paulo professional school helps women find work and serve their community

Veleiros is a women's health care training school started by members and friends of Opus Dei in an impoverished São Paulo bairro.

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The bairro of La Pedreira on the south side of São Paulo is one of the

most crowded neighborhoods in a densely-populated metropolis. The barrio sprang up in the 70s, as drought and unemployment in north and northeast Brazil drove the poor into the city in search of opportunity.

Anyone walking through La Pedreira's streets these days will see waste piling up in the street and people living in unsanitary shacks. In some sections, there is no water or electricity and the streets are unpaved. Healthcare and educational services are scarce. The most fortunate inhabitants are renting unfinished houses with just one or two rooms.

Some years ago, a number of members, cooperators and friends of Opus Dei started a professional school for neighborhood men and boys, which they called *La Pedreira*. It was the sort of initiative often encouraged by St. Josemaría Escrivá,

Opus Dei's founder. "We have to uphold the right of all men to live," he wrote, "to own what is necessary to lead a dignified existence, to work and to rest, to choose a particular state in life, to form a home, to bring children into the world within marriage and to be allowed to educate them, to pass peacefully through times of sickness and old age, to have access to culture, to join with other citizens to achieve legitimate ends, and, above all, the right to know and love God in perfect liberty, for conscience, true conscience, will discover the imprint of the Creator in all things." (Friends of God, 171).

In 1996, Opus Dei's prelate Bishop Javier Echevarría visited *La Pedreira* and encouraged the school's sponsors to start a similar school for the barrio's women and girls. They took his suggestion to heart and set to work. They decided to start

Veleiros, a professional training school with a focus on healthcare. With the help of La Associação Feminina de Estudos Sociais e Universitarios –AFESU – they purchased a 3-story building for the school's premises.

Why healthcare?

Brazil is a developing country with a shortage of healthcare professionals. As a result, professional training in this area is particularly useful both for the students and for the country, and it is relatively easy for a school to set up internship relationships with hospitals and health centers.

The current program for *Veleiros* students involves attending healthcare classes while participating in an internship. They can work in hospitals, home healthcare settings, school infirmaries, or health centers.

Martha Cândida Pereira, 41, a first-year student in the Family Healthcare program, went to *Veleiros* to get trained to care for elderly patients. “I wasn’t sure about this program,” she says, “because the school was something new in the neighborhood. But at *Veleiros* I have learned basic patient care, nutrition, and hygiene. And, above all, I have learned the respect that a patient deserves as a person.”

Specialized courses

In October of 2000, many students participated in a program called “Quality Healthcare” and were then able to get work. As a result of this positive response from employers, the course has been repeated for the past three years, with more students each time.

In August of 2002, the first “Family Care” program was offered, teaching students about caring for children

and the elderly, so that home health care could be provided for the sick of the community. Most of the students have already been hired and are putting their knowledge into practice. At the end of 2003, *Veleiros* plans on starting a “Nursing Techniques” program.

Besides theoretical classes, students have lab classes, do research, and study practical cases. In keeping with its Christian inspiration, *Veleiros* also offers spiritual and cultural formation.

A number of improvements have been made to *Veleiros*’ premises in the last few months. A donation from the Japanese government made it possible to purchase hospital beds and other necessary technical equipment. And with the help of other donations, a nursing lab and a data processing lab have been added.

For more information or to make a donation, please contact La Asociación Femenina de Estudios Sociales y Universitarios:

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