

Stephen's Story from Bogotá

By Stephen Buys

Stephen Buys, age 12, offered this story during our worship service on June 27, 2010. Stephen went to Colombia with his brother Zach and his dad Matt to visit the Walker-Wilson Family who are doing mission work in Bogotá, the Colombian capital, for three years. The Buys returned from their 10-day trip on June 25 with many stories to tell. We are fortunate that Stephen shared this experience with us.

When we were in Bogotá, Colombia, visiting the San Nicolas church with the Walker-Wilsons, it was one of the most shocking and depressing things I have ever experienced. When we entered the neighborhood the church was in, the leader of the church, an 18-year-old peace-rapper (as he called himself), had to come out to our bus stop to collect us so that we would not be mugged by the gangs who run the neighborhood. Even with him being there, we had to leave earlier than we would have liked because it is not safe after 5:00. As he led us to the church, I counted 32 stray dogs, and several more besides that seemed to be dead (at least they were not moving on the side of the road).

The streets were littered with plastic and other unidentifiable things. Many of the people were thin and gaunt but they looked unworried but they shouldn't have been. They looked like they had a hard life but got back up and...I would say "fighting" here, but we are a "peace" church. I don't know how to describe them. I don't think I ever will. When we finally entered the church, the leader took us upstairs and talked to us about the situation. Greg and Dad translated. He told us that two years ago, five people of about 20-25 years of age, were taken by the paramilitary, killed, and dressed up as guerillas. All this was just to fill their yearly quota of kills so that they could get a pay raise!

We went back downstairs, and the kids of the church asked if they could go to the park. By "park" in America it means a green place with playground structures for children, flowers — at least that is how I picture a "park." In Colombia, it means a field with a couple of goal posts, a blacktop, and a river nearby. The soccer field was covered in cow patties, and the blacktop was broken with grass peeking up through the cracks. That is a "park" in Colombia. We played soccer anyway. At one point, one of the older kids on the opposing team had a hand ball (i.e., touching the soccer ball with a hand, which is against the rules of play). The kids asked me if I would like to take the free kick. They lined up the ball. I had to run between two unfortunately placed cow patties to be able to make the shot. I took the shot and in all honesty it was a beautiful shot, low and chipped so it didn't hit any of the bumps or cow patties. The opposing goalie who was about 10 years old made an amazing diving save, skillfully avoiding the cow patties. At that point I realized how resilient and strong the Colombians had to be to live in such a place. I congratulated the keeper for such an excellent save, and, we weren't really keeping score, but ended up in something like a 4-4 tie.

We walked back up to the church, and the kids seemed to be talking about the game. We sat down and two of the kids immediately pulled me over to their table to sit with them. They soon realized I didn't speak Spanish but I asked my dad to translate. He asked the first kid how old he was. He said he was 11, but he looked much younger because he was so malnourished. He asked the second kid what his parents did. He replied that he never knew his dad, and that his mom had been killed by the paramilitary when he was young. We later learned that the person who directed the operation that killed his mom was elected president of Colombia just this past Sunday. He now lives with his grandma. The second kid had a similar story. At lunch we couldn't drink the juice they gave us because the drinking water it was made with was contaminated. After lunch they took me outside to play a game that I found out was marbles. I was absolutely terrible at it, but some of the other kids were amazing. They also had a little top that they could balance on a string and make it do tricks—like fly up in the air and they could catch it on their hand. It seemed they didn't have much else to do besides play soccer and play marbles. In my opinion those kids were more resilient and creative than most people in North America.

*At the end of this story, Nancy asked Stephen what would stay with him from this experience. He said, "**I will never be the same.** And I think I'll do a lot less whining."*