



# Marianist International Volunteers

MARIANIST FAMILY - Newsletter 16 - September 2009 - [www.marianist.org](http://www.marianist.org)



**> Here's a new worldview...  
If we all work for it,  
another world is possible!**



Dear MIV friends,

This is perhaps one of the most special editions of the VIM Newsletters that we have published so far. This time, you will find articles from almost all our current VIM volunteers in all corners of the world:

- Mike Elliott from the USA in Argentina
- Mike Peterson from the USA in Argentina
- Luciana Coviaga from Argentina in Brazil
- John Ventimiglia from the USA in Peru
- Miguel Perles from Spain in Peru
- Liz Ramey from the USA in Kenya
- Maria Lis from Spain in Kenya

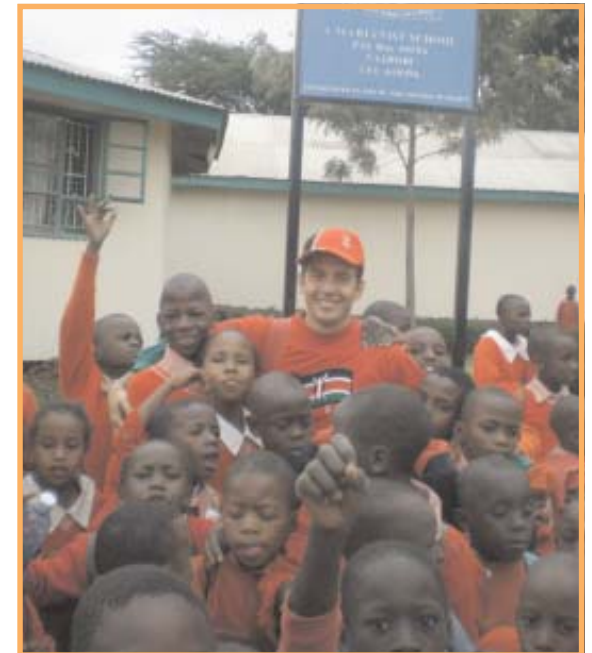
Besides, thanks to the Marianist Lay Communities (MLC) decision to hold their 5th International Meeting in Kenya, many of us had the great chance and the privilege to get to know this wonderful country, its wonderful culture, and above all, its wonderful people. Thanks to this meeting, we have cried, we have laughed together with Maria and Liz, our current VIM volunteers in Kenya, who have really impressed us with their experience. Some of the people who have been struck by them have also written an article in this Newsletter: Boris from the MLC in Spain, and Maurice, a young Kenyan man who has continuously escorted and supported our volunteers in the slum in Nairobi since the very beginning of their service.

Exceptionally, because I always give the priority to our volunteers in these newsletters, I'd like to add a few words here about my own experience in Kenya. I got to know Nairobi, I visited with the two VIM volunteers to get to know their work, but I did it volunteering myself alongside with

them in the slum of Mukuru, and I truly fell in love with its people and its culture. Three weeks have already gone by since I got back home from Africa, and I keep remembering those faces, like Miguel says, our VIM volunteer from Spain in Peru, the faces of God. I have no doubt that God can be easily and clearly seen in the faces of the smallest ones, the most needy, but at the same time, of the most grateful ones. I think that anyone can understand my words, but I believe that only those who have seen what I've seen can actually FEEL what I feel. Asante sana to all those in Kenya who have taught us about loving our neighbor, about service, and about being grateful to life, as we celebrate and share it.

I know invite with more enthusiasm than ever all those who have some time available in their lives to join the VIM as an international volunteer, and to all those who do not have this availability, to help us publicize this information, so that more people can join the venture that the VIM proposes. If we all want it, a better world IS definitely possible!

**José Luis "Perico" Pérez**  
MIV Coordinator





## Kenya can seduce you, but it can also break your heart!

I want to make a special note about the Marianist work in Mukuru. It's about a primary school located in the middle of the second biggest slum in Nairobi (400,000 inhabitants!), literally an oasis, as they call it there, surrounded by extreme poverty.

Right now we have an MLC member from Valencia there, volunteering for a year: Maria Viñuales. It's the sixth time she's been there! Before, she volunteered during her summer vacations, but now she's volunteering there for a whole year. What a lesson for life she taught us! Not only because she's living there, but also because of her experience. One day after our visit to the school, we had the chance to listen from her mouth in every phrase she said these 2 words: joy and God.

I've been thinking for awhile whether to include a picture of the slum here or not, because I don't want this message to focus on poverty. However, it's important to have a first contact with poverty to be able to see beyond it. Like Maria said, if you want to see God there you have to see beyond poverty. These kids have nothing, but they give you so much joy! They give you even what they don't have! As we were riding the bus to get to the school, we felt terribly sad and devastated!

Thirty minutes riding on the bus in the middle of an endless slum, with "rivers" of putrefied water flowing in front of the "houses", trash all over, and people, many people, and many children, sitting on it!

When we finally got to the school (like I told you, literally an oasis), hundreds of children were expecting us, with a broad smile on their faces, to share with us their dances, their songs, and to offer us bags and bracelets as gifts!!!! Wow, what a lesson of faith! Impossible not to see God right there, with, among and in the most needy! Well, the term "most needy" may apply there as far as material possessions is concerned, because at the spiritual level, I believe that it's us who are the needy ones! When we got there and Maria saw our faces, her question was very straightforward: "aren't you all Christians?" When we got off the bus, we were still unable to react. No photograph can express the feelings that invaded us in that half hour, as we saw the slum from the bus before arriving at the school.

We were even more shocked after the performance and the gifts they gave us. These people don't have anything and they gave us things, they even gave us some tea and cookies! Can you imagine what a cookie means in the middle of the slum? They washed our hands before we had tea when there was an endless line of people trying to buy water in the few places where it's available... And everybody welcomed us so joyfully! The important thing is that they do all this because they want us to feel welcome and at home, and they do so from the bottom of their hearts! You would also be speechless after this lesson of Faith, after seeing God there!



Boris with the kids in Mukuru upon the visit of the Marianist Lay Communities International Delegates.



Besides working with the kids till the age of 14, the Marianists also opened a training center for the students' parents. Liz, a US volunteer, first arrived in Kenya 2 years ago to write a thesis about marginalization in Nairobi, and she has stayed there ever since! She's currently in charge of this family program.

All I can say is thank you to the religious, the teachers, the volunteers like Maria and Liz, who make this project true. And thank you also to the World Council of the Marianist Family for supporting the MIV: Marianist International Volunteers program, and particularly to Perico, for running it, and for all his efforts to send out



**María's family (Miguel and Esther) and Brother Domingo Fuentes SM visiting the OLN school in Mukuru.**

volunteers from our communities.

**Boris Giambanco** / MLC Spain

I've already spent 1 month and 3 weeks in this, my 6th adventure in Nairobi, and I already have some mixed feelings, which is pretty normal, since it's not the same to come here for 2 months, as I usually did it, as to come here for a whole year. I've spent all this time here without water, and as for electricity, just 4 days a week, although this is not really a serious problem. Kenya is going through one of the worst draughts and famines in its whole history, and things seem to be going from bad to worse. Fortunately, during this time, I've had the chance to share these feelings and many more experiences with Liz, the volunteer from the US. It's really wonderful to stick around her and to feel her

support. I was also glad to be visited by my brother Miguel and his wife Esther, they really enjoyed the kids a lot, and especially, I was thrilled by the incredible visit of "Perico" and by the Lay Marianists who came to the school one day. What can I tell you about Perico's visit??? I think that he felt exactly the same as what I felt the first time I came to Kenya, 3 years ago already. Perico has fallen in love with Kenya. His stay at school for 2 weeks has been just awesome. Thanks to his idea to grab the guitar every day at school, he made us sing, dance and cry with all our kids at school. Can you imagine singing "Heal the World" and "We are the World" by Michael Jackson with ALL the children singing at the same time? I don't think so, it's impossible to imagine that, you have to live it, feel it, smell it. And this is what Perico did during his stay at OLN, the school in Mukuru. I saw Perico truly laugh, smile, and cry, feeling his laughter, his smile, and his tears. You can ONLY ONLY ONLY feel this if you come to Kenya and you spend some time with these kids, those that God loves the most. But watch out Perico, Kenya can seduce you, but it can also break your heart!!!

On a different side note, I really enjoyed going with Liz to the Lay Assembly to speak and share

our experience as volunteers here in Kenya, both at the OLN school, at Maria House, and at the project where Liz is currently working, Ujamaa. It was really moving to share our feelings with you all, who have come from all over the world, you were all there, only to listen to our stories. Once again, my feelings overwhelmed me, once again, I felt that God was close to me. One year is hard, I can already feel it, but I give thanks to God for having Liz close to me, for having the Marianists close to me, and for feeling that God is still in my backpack, like in 2006, when this adventure started.

**María Lis** / MIV volunteer from Spain in Kenya

(This article was written by Maurice Otieno, a wonderful young guy from Kenya, who studied at Our Lady of Nazareth school in the slum of Mukuru when he was a child, who's currently living there, and who has kindly supported, escorted and accompanied our VIM volunteers from the start during their service. Asante sana, Maurice, we all love you very much and we owe you so much! Our VIM volunteers would not have done as much had it not been for your support, as well as Tom's and Moses'! These are Maurice's words about the

impact of our VIM volunteers in his town and in his school):

"I am glad to be involved in the writing of this article. Maria and Liz are good friends of mine and their presence here means a lot to the entire community. As you might know, Liz will be volunteering in Kenya for two years while Maria will be a volunteer for a whole year.

The work of these two amazing volunteers involve teaching classes at O.L.N, counseling the kids, teaching and playing games with the children and many other activities. The children really like being taught by Liz and Maria. They not only learn many academic things but also about the way people live in different parts of the World. Bear in mind that Maria comes from Spain and Liz is an American.

Liz is currently working at the Family wing of O.L.N. The centre goes by the name Ujamaa Family Centre and it is just adjacent to O.L.N. At Ujamaa, Liz teaches



literacy classes to parents of the kids from O.L.N. She also teaches them computing, nutrition and hygiene classes... apart from that, she also doubles up as the counselor to the parents. Liz is just awesome!!! She is smart. I wish you could see her teaching and talking with people in Swahili (the national language of Kenya). Everybody likes her and she gets along perfectly with almost everyone.

Maria has certainly become a celebrity here. You will hear children shouting her name wherever she goes. Maria gets along well with O.L.N kids... she will be teaching at the school at the beginning of next term. She has already taught the children nice songs, new games and most kids are eager to enroll in her



**Giving out teddy bears collected in Spain to the kids at OLN school.**



Spanish classes that she is going to offer. Maria is an excellent counselor and she really cares about the kids. This beautiful Spanish lady is just talented and the children have fallen in love with her.

I don't know how to express this but all I can say is that the presence of these two amazing volunteers have touched the lives of many people here. Their presence alone is just AWESOME! I wish that more volunteers could come and learn more about this beautiful culture and teach these wonderful kids about theirs."

**Maurice Otieno** / OLN former student, Nairobi resident, and MIV local assistant



**Maurice with José Luis Pérez, upon "Perico's" recent visit in Kenya.**

Greetings from Mukuru kwa Njenga in Nairobi, Kenya! These days I am working with a new Marianist project, the Ujamaa Family Centre located next to Our Lady of Nazareth Primary School. Ujamaa means "extended family" or "community" in Swahili. We offer computer classes and both Swahili and English literacy for parents from the Mukuru slum. We also offer counseling and seminars on important issues in the community, including nutrition, human rights, and HIV/AIDS. And our parents committee is preparing to carry out campaigns on other pertinent topics like alcoholism and hygiene. Working with the parents has been very educational for me, as they all come with their own life experiences, expertise, and creativity. The ideas for improving the community never end! Karibuni sana - welcome!

**Liz Ramey** / MIV volunteer from United States in Kenya



**Liz with the people in the new project.**



## Back home.

Having recently returned to the United States after my seven-month stay in Peru, I can honestly say that serving as a volunteer was a once-in-a-lifetime experience that has had a profound effect on my life. It was not only an excellent opportunity to help out those in need, but also an amazing chance to learn so much about another part of the world and to become fully immersed in a uniquely diverse culture. I arrived in Peru expecting to be the one that would be making the contribution, but I left the country having received so much more than I ever could have given of myself. I would strongly encourage anyone who is considering participating as a volunteer to have confidence in himself and to make a leap of faith. You certainly will not regret the decision.

**John Ventimiglia** / MIV volunteer from United States in Peru



**John with his friends and community in Callao.**

## The faces of God.

I've always wanted to know what God's face looks like, His hands, His eyes, the faces of the Apostles, of the Virgin Mary, of the people that Jesus preached. . . This is something that we will never see here, but the truth is that next time I read the Bible I will be able to imagine the faces of Zacchaeus, Martha, Mary, the one of the good Samaritan, of the pilgrims of Emmaus. . . I'd like to imagine Donato's face, one of the pastoral agents in one of the small villages here, as if it were Zacchaeus' face while climbing the fig tree, or Erlinda's and America's faces as if they were Martha and Mary awaiting someone's visit and ready to welcome him/her as if he/she were the very same Messiah.

When I think of Jesus' hands I'd like to imagine the hands of the carpenter in the town of San Francisco del Suro, who has been charged to make the benches for the Church that we are finishing to build in one small village here. His hands seem to be always wearing gloves, they feel rough; they look big, tired; and they are full of injuries badly healed. I'd like to imagine that the people who lived with Jesus looked like all the people who have crossed my path throughout this year. They live in houses made of mud with no foundations, built by the people themselves, with no electricity; they walk every day to get some water, and they cook with fire.

As a matter of fact, the other day we were commenting on the image we have of God and we were reading the three parables in Luke 15. When we read the one about the lost sheep, a woman sighed as she said: "Oh! My son!" At that moment I realized that the Bible was written by and for these people, who know about the size of a grain of mustard (actually, I have never seen one myself!), who have experienced the loss of a sheep, whose lives, as from their birth, are tied to and depend on their harvests, on their animals, on the rain, on the moon, and on the sun.

**Mikel Perles** / MIV volunteer from Spain in Peru

**John Ventimiglia and Miguel Perles on video : <http://buenconsejo.marianistas.org/cronicas-vim-peru/>**



## A young Argentine woman volunteering in Brazil.

I am writing this report from Baurú, Brazil, the place where my experience as a volunteer started on June 17th at the Cana Project, in the favela (slum) Ferradura Mirin. The project started in 1995 to provide kids and teens from 6 to 18 with a learning center of several classrooms, where students can learn about human values, health, arts, creativity, work skills and work ethics.

My initial motivation to volunteer in this place was to share my little gifts with those who need them, so that they can improve the life quality of this community,



Luciana at the "Junina" Party.

as well as my interest in learning another language and another culture. I was fortunate to find all this in the VIM, as it gave me the chance to live this experience in this "favela" in Ms. Perpetua's house with her daughter, who adopted me as part of their family.

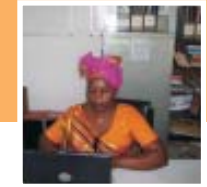
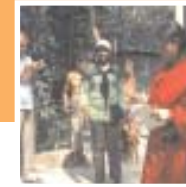
I have recently got to know and joined the Marianist Family. Even though I was raised Catholic, I didn't know about the Marianists and about their works, and as I'm getting involved in this family day after day, I can truly feel like this is my FAMILY, a family that helps me strengthen my faith and my call to serve.

I'm volunteering with 8 professionals who work with kids between 5 and 18, fostering their physical, social and psychological development by means of educational

activities, personal support, and a program to strengthen their family bonds. Teenagers are also educated in civil rights and duties, culture, work skills and social inclusion programs. I gradually got used to this new culture, and even though I sometimes had a hard time with the language, I could still conduct some dynamics and group works aimed at developing the sense of belonging to a group and communication skills.

A few days after my arrival here, people celebrated the "festa Juninha" in honor of St Antonio, João, and Pedro. It was a real celebration for children and adults, who danced typical songs and ate typical food like "pipoca" (pop corn), hot chocolate, and they played different games in a joyful atmosphere.

Even though I've been here for a short time now, and some of the activities were cancelled due to the Swine Flu, the team did not cancel their activities, and three other volunteers from Spain joined us for 15 days. We put together a library of



over 2000 books, a reading corner and a video room, which are now ready to be used by the children, so they know what it's like to work in a library.

Besides, with another teacher, we have planned some group dynamics so as to teach them about continents, languages, and to strengthen their knowledge about their own nationality, as many students believe that if you speak Spanish it's because you're from Spain! They think that Argentina is on the other side of the ocean, because as the Spaniards have come to visit and volunteer, the children

don't understand that we speak the same language but that we come from different countries. As we go along, we try to answer some of their questions about general culture, geography, etc.

In addition to this, I share my life with lay and religious Marianists; we share mass and meetings where the family spirit is always present. These experiences freshen up my spirit in these terribly hot days!

Greetings to you all, and like Miguel Perles, a VIM volunteer in Peru, says in

one of his articles, and I share this feeling, these experiences leave a mark in your heart, these smiles, these hugs, these expressions, there's so much more to be lived in the months to come!

**Luciana Coviaga** / MIV volunteer from Argentina in Brazil



**Luciana with the "crianças" (Brazilian kids).**



**Luciana at the "Junina" Party.**



## Volunteers in the south of the world.

Well, two months have passed since I arrived in Buenos Aires to begin my year of service, and so, I would like to recount a little bit of my work. After a crash course of adjusting my Guatemalan Spanish into the Spanish accent that the Argentines use, I am finding myself functioning much more efficiently in the culture and in my volunteer work. My first month here, I worked in a center for kids in one of Buenos Aires' shantytowns, while also adjusting to the Argentine culture.



**Mike Elliott  
(Mike 2) in  
General  
Roca.**

The second month I spent working in General Roca, a tiny city in the southern part of the country, in the Patagonian region. There, I lived and worked at a center for street kids, called Fundacion Ninquihue. Working an exhausting 11 hours a day with the children was an incredible experience for both

the children and me. Though many of the children have "parents" and "homes," the children are generally lacking attention and love from their parents and the basic amenities of a home, running water, electricity, food, etc. So, at the center they are provided breakfast, lunch, and a snack, along with a warm shower and pair of clean clothes to change into each day. While the work was tiring, learning the importance of presence with those in need was an invaluable lesson that my work at the center imparted on me and so, I hope to continue to carry out the simple, yet important work of presence as a begin my third month of service also working with the ill in a hospital.

**Michael Elliott** / MIV volunteer from United States in Argentina



**Mike Elliott (Mike 2)  
in General Roca.**



## Building Dreams.

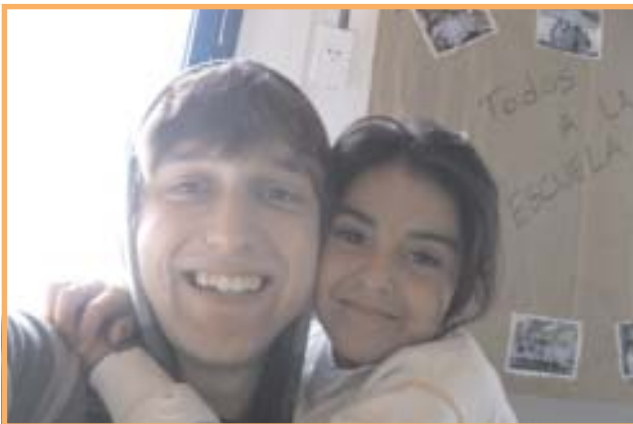
What can I say two months into my time in Argentina? I came here in search of a way to find real meaning in my daily work, and as a way of learning from people who come from other another culture and another worldview. Certainly it has been nothing short of an adventure. After adjusting to the new eating schedules and the very unique brand of Spanish they speak here, I was eager to get to work. For my first month I found myself in one of Buenos Aires' many villas, or shantytowns.

In recent years a multitude of people have come to Buenos Aires from the provinces and surrounding countries in search of a better life. But not everyone finds the work they were looking for, and, as is the case with impoverished neighborhoods around the world, drugs and violence began to have a disproportionate influence on the villas that lay on the city's outskirts.

Understandably, it can be overwhelming to be a child growing up in such a situation. That is why the Center for Building Dreams in Villa Soldati works to give the kids from the neighborhood a safe place to go after school. There I helped out on a series of activities and workshops from baking and gardening to dance and self defense. I even developed a workshop myself by accident, when I found the kids were enthralled by my middling drawing ability.

Whether my new course on sketching octopi will be taught across Argentina remains to be seen, but I do know that I am excited for what awaits me in my further work at the Center for Building Dreams!

**Mike Peterson** / MIV volunteer from United States in Argentina



**Mike Peterson (Mike 1)** at the "Building Dreams" Center.



**Mike Peterson (Mike 1)** at the "Building Dreams" Center.



Mike 1 and 2 in  
Buenos Aires.



Mike 1 and 2 in  
Buenos Aires.



The MIV offers the possibility to volunteer for six months to a year or two in pastoral ministry and/ or development projects animated by the Marianist Family in different parts of the world, such as the ones presented in this newsletter. For further information, contact the MIV Coordinator, Mr. José Luis Pérez at [joseluisperez@sinectis.com.ar](mailto:joseluisperez@sinectis.com.ar)