

A Postcard from Chile

By Andrea Nemetz (BJ '88)

It was likely Victor's first birthday party—even though he was turning 13.

He certainly hadn't had a cake before and the fact he was sharing his party with his one-year-old niece, Isadora, and our team of Habitat for Humanity volunteers added to the excitement of the sunny day in Quintay, Chile.

The courtyard where we had been working for the last 10 days hummed with happy activity. Our team, made up of 11 volunteers from Nova Scotia, Prince Edward Island and Ontario, was building a 200-square-foot addition onto a 600-square-foot home shared by a family of eight, including Victor and Isadora.

Empanadas—cheese and meat-stuffed pastries—were laid out on wooden tables surrounded by balloons and ribbons. For dessert, it was *mote con huesillo*, a traditional Chilean delicacy consisting of dehydrated peaches with stewed barley drenched in sugary peach juice.

The farewell/birthday party at which children from the extended family dressed up in elaborate national costume to perform the *cueca*, the Chilean dance they had taught us earlier in the week with varying degrees of success, was a chance to say goodbye and reflect on what we had accomplished during our short but memorable stay.

We had met at Santiago airport on February 1, 2009—an 11-hour direct flight from New York City—and were whisked to the exotically named Casablanca, a small town in the wine-growing region of Chile. With a similar climate to California's Napa Valley (dry and hilly, with scrubby bush and prickly cacti), Casablanca acted as our base for nearly two weeks.

We commuted for almost an hour each day to Quintay, a beautiful former whaling village on the coast. As we drove toward the village, down an exceedingly steep hill with gasp-inducing hairpin turns, surrounded by pine trees on all sides, we immediately thought of Cape Breton's Cabot Trail.

We were building for a family that included mother Marcia, who worked as a cleaner; Pepe, 21, mother of Isadora, who worked

on a town beautification project; Jose, 20, who worked overnight shifts at a tourist hotel on the nearby Playa Grande, a beautiful white sand beach; Seylin, 16, and nine months pregnant; Victor, 12; and Aurelia, 7.

Their wooden home, with its two bedrooms and crowded kitchen/living area, had gaps in the walls and mould on its ceiling. But everything was kept scrupulously clean.

The house was one of four homes in a fenced-in compound, all occupied by family members, many of who came to help us build and talk to us in excited Spanish, which we became more expert at interpreting as the build went on. It was obvious how important family was in this society. The yard was filled with a dozen pudgy puppies, grown-up dogs and cats and, on occasion, a gleaming horse (some members of the family were champion Chilean rodeo riders).

The first four build days were devoted to preparation for the group of mostly novice builders. Volunteers were not required to have construction experience, though five of our group, including me, had participated in a build in Panajachel, Guatemala, two years earlier.

We used pickaxes and shovels to dig a trench 60 cm deep for the foundation, which we lined with smooth beach stones alternating with concrete.

We learned this recipe for concrete: dump five buckets of water into a plastic barrel, add eight shovelfuls of gravel, three shovels of cement and ten of sand; switch the motor on, let it agitate, then dump into a waiting wheelbarrow. Repeat. Repeat. Repeat until not only the foundation is filled, but a floor is poured, which contains a buried toonie and a plastic-encased list of all who participated.

Meanwhile, other group members were framing the house, driving six-inch spikes into two-by-fours, learning how to straight-



Andrea Nemetz (BJ '88), pictured centre, works with her fellow Habitat for Humanity team members to build an addition on a home in Quintay, Chile.

Photo: Erin MacNeil

en nails when hammers failed to hit square on the head, and struggled with toe-nailing (driving nails into corners).

Progress seemed slow till the fifth day, when we moved the walls and roof trusses into place and nailed on the siding. It really looked like a house!

After a weekend break touring wineries and ambling along the winding, cobblestone streets of Valparaiso that burst with vibrant street art, we attacked our project with new vigour.

We cut tar paper for under the steel roof, lined the walls with fiberglass insulation, applied wallboard and painted the outside a beautiful leafy green, a colour chosen by the family after much consultation—paint being a rare luxury in Quintay. An electrician hooked up the rooms, glass windows and doors were installed and Victor's shy smile got wider as he excitedly gestured to show us where his bed would be—he was to get one of the two new rooms.

And then... it was done. All that remained, after the party, was the formal cutting of the ribbon in Chile's colours of red, white and blue.

Our feeling of satisfaction was nothing compared to the smiles, hugs and tears from the family as they bid us goodbye. But it was not *adios*, merely *hasta luego*, see you later, or so we all hoped. 🍷

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