

*Larisa Sunderland lives in New York City with her family, but spent 2 months this summer in Brazil as a volunteer for A Child's Garden of Peace. This is her description of her experience.*

## **Working For a Child's Garden of Peace**

This summer, I had the opportunity to work with my aunt on a community project she started in southern Brazil called a Child's Garden of Peace. When I committed myself to living there with her friends from the community for six weeks, I was ignorant of the enormity of the impact the summer would have on me.

The first week I spent in Santo Angelo was the hardest week of my life. I was wrought with homesickness, and felt about as able as a child - I had to turn to my aunt or to my new friend Myra Margolin, who also works for the project, for help in communicating. I was unable to go anywhere by myself and was surrounded by complete strangers. My diary entries from that first week were brimming with wishes for my family, my friends and for English.

By the second week, I was incredibly close with my host sister, Carla Francielli. I suppose our first piece of real bonding occurred towards the end of the first week when we discussed (as much as my Portuguese would allow) an internationally puzzling topic; teenage boys. She had been so warm and welcoming the entire time I was staying in her house, but before that night we hadn't really had the chance to just "hang out" as girls. After that, things became a lot easier. She became a sort of translator for me-- she could better understand my Portuguese, and my ear accustomed itself to her way of speaking. We went everywhere together, and spent a lot of nights sleeping in the same bed, because it was so cold. I still missed my family, but it was a less desperate sort of missing, and I began to really enjoy myself!

As soon as I started working at the school and at the local church with the children creating a garden with my aunt, working on a mural, doing some art projects and teaching a bit of English, I was absolutely smitten with the community. The children were wonderful, always offering a kiss and a hug and willing to try a hundred synonyms on me until I understood some piece of what they were saying. I felt completely comfortable with my host family and had become better at developing relationships without language at my disposal.

When I turned seventeen, my friends in Santo Angelo threw me a wonderful surprise party, complete with a beautiful cake, delicious finger food and luscious homemade candies in ornately hand-decorated papers. It was so touching to see the work and time and money that everyone had put into this party! These wonderful friends of mine, who have so little, were willing to give so much, because they are such loving people. It was so beautiful to be the recipient of such sweetness. They taught me so much about the importance of opening your heart, because the rewards are so great.

Living in Brazil, I learned tangible things like - some Portuguese, rituals of another culture and how much energy it takes to work with children. I also learned a lot about myself, and about the human capacity to love and to care for other people, regardless of language or cultural barriers. I learned a little about how badly money and opportunity are distributed. I saw people work sixteen-hour days, sleeping only for a couple of hours in the afternoon, and living in horrendous conditions. I saw my host mother working three jobs and watched the family give up so much because they don't have enough money. When I went to Santo Angelo, I was willing to settle for the world as it is. Now I know things need to change.