

CHILD'S GARDEN OF PEACE PROJECT

MY SUMMER IN SANTO ANGELO, BRAZIL – by Myra Margolin

This summer was my third visit to Santo Ângelo. I first went four years ago to teach art with Illéne's project and then returned two years ago to run documentary video workshops for teenagers there. Therefore, it was wonderful this summer to return to the Centro Sul neighborhood which now feels so familiar. It is astonishing to see each of the children get bigger. I have very few small children here in the US who I have watched grow up they way I have these kids in Brazil.

I tested before leaving about what my focus should be this summer. I received light playfulness, lots of art, and providing a venue for the kids' self-expression. In our three weeks in Santo Ângelo, we set up informal art classes every afternoon in the basement of the newly built church. The classes were available to any kid who wanted to come. Therefore, we never knew if we'd have three kids or twenty-five or what ages they'd be. Working within this loose structure, we did several projects: popsicle stick puppets, sock puppets, and self-portraits (of self at different ages). Also, I had Dr. Seuss's "My Book About Me" translated into Portuguese. Each child got a xeroxed copy to fill out lots of information about themselves (i.e., tracing their foot, listing how many buttons they have, how tall they are, what their favorite foods are, etc...)

Additionally, we tried doing some photography classes at the end of the day, after the art lessons. We started off by looking at pictures from the classic photography book "Family of Man" as well as some other photo books I'd brought. We talked about what makes a picture interesting in terms of both composition and subject matter. Then we went out into the neighborhood with a few cameras to take pictures. Some of the kids really understood what we discussed and took some lovely candid portraits of people in the community.

In the second week, Illene asked me to coordinate a mural project at the school. I had never done a mural, but agreed. One of the lovely things about working with Illene all of these years is that she has given me many opportunities to do things I have never done before. The first year I came, I had never taught art. After being in Brazil, I was able to return to New York and getting a job teaching art at a camp. Similarly, I had never done a participatory video project when we ran our documentary workshops in 2004. Since then, I have taught video with several organizations in Chicago and am now off to grad school to study participatory video in community development contexts. So I am grateful to Illene for all of the opportunities she has given me and the trust she has put in me each time I have worked with her.

The mural project was much more work than I anticipated and in our final week I turned over the art classes to some of the teenagers we'd worked with in the past. Together with the kids, they came up with a puppet play about a little butterfly looking for a mate that the kids performed at our final art show/party the weekend we left. It was really fun to work with the kids and the simple puppets. When I was still doing the art classes, I had the kids make popsicle stick and paper puppets of something they wanted to be for a day (an animal, an object, etc...) There were a lot of flowers and butterflies, a car, some angels. When the puppets were done, I asked them questions and the kids responded as the puppets. It was amazing how animated and excited they got – which seemed to confirm the testing about providing an outlet for expression. I am excited to do more work with kids and puppets in the future...

Helping me with the art classes and especially with the mural was Illene's niece Larissa who had come from New York for the summer. We worked with 85 kids to paint a mural based on the kids' drawings on the 5 foot by 55 foot wall of the schoolyard. Each kid had an

opportunity to work on the mural and painted his or her own fish in the little river at the bottom of the mural. It was wonderful to see the kids come in to school and run to the wall and point, “That’s my fish!”

From Santo Ângelo we went to a permaculture course in Bage, still in Rio Grande do Sul. Illene brought four young people from Santo Ângelo as well as a few others who were interested. For me, the most interesting element of the time in Bage was the meeting of two very distinct and very different cultures. The culture at the permaculture center was like the hippie culture – long hair, hemp pants, brown rice, homemade shampoo. The kids from Santo Ângelo are from a small, relatively isolated town.

They eat red meat at least once a day, if not twice. When they found out we would not be eating meat the entire week, they nearly died.

There were a lot of strange things for them about the culture there. There were dry (composting) toilets, people meditating, houses made from straw, dirt and cow dung, juice made out of cactus. One of the teachers of the course is part of the MST (Brazil’s Landless Workers’ Movement) and lives on a settlement near Bage. For me, it was a very interesting experience, being of yet a different culture. One thing that struck me later was that the people working at the permaculture center seemed to be making choices about every aspect of their lives – they grew what they ate, built their houses in accordance with their worldview, sought out information and training on conscientious living. Even making their own soap was a choice to not support the negative environmental practices of big corporations. On the other hand, choice is one of the biggest challenges for young people in Santo Ângelo – there are so few choices. It is nearly impossible to go to college because of the way education is structured in Brazil. There are very few jobs in Santo Ângelo, particularly for people who do not have higher education. Therefore, most women work as maids and most men work in construction or other low-paying jobs. While the young people did learn a lot about green building and non-chemical farming, from my vantage points one of the most valuable outcomes from the experience was the cultural expansion that came from living a completely foreign lifestyle for a week.

Our last stop was Sao Borja where we stayed in a convent that runs a social program. Again, Illene and I tested about our roles there and I felt not to embark on any big projects but to do small, easy art projects and hang out with the kids. I felt in this testing to make very simple toys with them. So, with one class we made stuffed snakes out of stockings and with others we made simple dolls out of yarn. With the tiny children we did fingerpainting. There was a group of pre-teen girls who were extremely vivacious, friendly and enthusiastic. Larissa and I did some very simple yoga classes with them (neither of us knows yoga very well, but we improvised)! I had the feeling, during the last part in which we all just lay quietly on our backs for a few minutes, that some of the girls were very grateful for a moment’s silence in their day. The girls organized a little party for us on our last day there with cookies and music and soda.

So, overall it was a lovely, light summer filled with lots of children and art and fun. I miss everyone very much now – there was so much warmth and generosity and love.