News



Girls from the Fundación Alalay children's home in Huajchilla, near La Paz, Bolivia, practice their drawing and painting skills. (Courtesy of Robert Aitchison)



by James Dearie

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A project conceived to spark the imagination of disadvantaged children and help them explore the arts and themselves is bringing joy to the streets of Bolivia.

Brooklyn, New York-based artist Robert Aitchison had the idea for what would ultimately become this project, Arte Fogata, during his first visit to Bolivia in 2008. A prolific traveler, Aitchison visited La Paz, the third-largest city in Bolivia, to see friends and put on an art show.

"I saw levels of poverty I just hadn't been exposed to in this country or in other travels around the world," Aitchison told NCR.

Poverty in Bolivia forces many children to work. An NPR report in 2014 estimated the number of child laborers at 850,000, and children often begin working as young as 7 years old. Thousands of children in Bolivia live in the streets.

In 2015, Aitchison returned to Bolivia, and a friend introduced him to Claudia Gonzáles, founder of Fundación Alalay, an organization that works to keep children off the street. The organization maintains a home in Huajchilla, near La Paz, which provides refuge for children ages 6-14 living on the street, who are free to leave if they choose. Other homes closer to the city provide living quarters for teens.

"What I thought was going to be a 30-minute coffee conversation turned into a ... really beautiful conversation about how she started that foundation on her own, and we had very similar affinities for trying to use our talent to serve those in need," Aitchison said.

When Aitchison first visited, González's home in Huajchilla offered several programs for the children, including violin lessons and soccer. It lacked, however, a program in the visual arts.



The Fundación Alalay children's home in Huajchilla, near La Paz, Bolivia (Courtesy of Robert Aitchison)

"What if I came back with a bunch of art supplies, and tried, like, a workshop, and see if the kids enjoy that experience," Aitchison recalls suggesting to Gonzáles.

Aitchison has years of experience teaching visual arts to special needs students, both children and adults. He currently works at two schools in New York during the school year. Many of the art programs he has worked with in the past had a "therapeutic" effect on the students, Aitchison said. Although not a therapist, Aitchison said he was able to see how art could positively change lives.

He returned to Bolivia in the summer of 2016 to set up his workshop in an old building on Alalay's campus in Huajchilla. He split his time the next few months between working with the children in the home and those still on the streets.



Robert Aitchison, right, with two Bolivian boys (Courtesy of Robert Aitchison)

"The kids really enjoyed it," he said, adding that he reconnected instantly with the children he had met the year before.

"What Robert does is probably one of the greatest gifts" the children could receive, Belgian documentarian Sam Asaert told NCR, adding that Aitchison's project will be a "key element" in his upcoming documentary about Bolivian street children airing on Belgian television this fall. Aitchison "gives them a voice. ... His presence lets them know someone cares about them," Asaert said.

The children participate in Arte Fogata after school. Their projects vary, and include pencil drawings, pastels and watercolors, but "I try to do a lot of projects that revolve around self-identity and aspiration, positive themes," Aitchison said.

While working on his film, Asaert was able to see some of these projects up close. He recalled a project in which Aitchison had the children draw pictures of animals they identified with, and then explain how they chose their subjects.

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"One girl drew a bird," Asaert remembers. When pressed for a reason, she told them, "I want to be a bird so I can fly away from here."

"They'll tell you, they feel invisible," Aitchison said of the street children. "They're living on the streets, and people walk around them like they're dogs."

Aitchison funds Arte Fogata through crowdsourcing. His most recent GoFundMe campaign raised $6,000 in three weeks, which he intends to spend mainly on art materials local to La Paz.



Robert Aitchison oversees a workshop at the children's home in Huajchilla. (Courtesy of Robert Aitchison)

The project has been growing and attracting more interest than Aitchison expected. He did not even give the project its name, which translates from Spanish as "Bonfire Art," until his return in 2017.

He is now considering incorporating Arte Fogata as a nonprofit, and is working with several advisers on what to do next, he told NCR in early August, just a few days before returning to Bolivia.

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