

Second International Leda Project Comes to a Close

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September 16, 2016



Leda Participants Return to Asuncion

Our rich experiences in Leda came to an end when the Aquaban, a large riverboat, pulled close to shore at Puerto Leda late Friday afternoon. The Aquaban is a strong, stable boat that serves as the central transportation link for the region. The few roads that cut through the region are mostly unpaved and unreliable. Though speedy, transportation by plane is far too expensive for regular citizens and rain can also close local airstrips. It is the slow-moving riverboat that serves as a steady and reliable friend to villagers up and down the long, winding Paraguay River.



We climbed onto the deck of the Aquaban and began the 21-hour boat ride from Leda downriver to the rustic community of Vallemi. Onboard ship we either slept in hammocks hung in the hallways or stayed in a small cabin with bunk beds. Card games and conversations went on long into the night. The boat was partitioned into little areas where vendors sold their goods because the vessel served as the local store for the many small settlements that nestled on the banks of the Paraguay River. If you looked down from the deck on arriving at one of those settlements, you could see villagers, animals and goods waiting by the shore in anticipation for the Aquaban.

The journey on the Aquaban provided us with a firsthand glimpse of the way life is lived in community after community along the Paraguay River. We disembarked in the town of Vallemi, one of the largest communities on the river, and made our way to a local restaurant where we dined on pizza. A charter bus was waiting for us to board and begin the nine-hour journey to the capital city of Asuncion. Fortunately, the roads in this area were paved, providing a relatively smooth ride and we reached our destination late Saturday night. While our boat and bus ride took 30 hours, those passengers who remained on the Aquaban would

journey a full three days before arriving at the capital.

Fellowship and Fun in Asuncion

Returning to Asuncion with its city night-lights, traffic and miles of streets lined with stores was a reminder that our Chaco adventure had come to an end. We pulled in to our small, comfortable hotel,

exhausted from the long journey, and quickly made it to our rooms. We were in our final stages of the project and in some ways it was the time for the deepest reflection and the most fun.

Sunday was a special day -- we named it “The International Day of Friendship” -- because our team from 12 nations was spending the day with the Paraguayan members of the Unification movement. It is a common practice in the movement to talk about being part of “one family under God,” yet it is always inspiring when we actually have the chance to share together as a substantial expression of that family. This was a day during which we would celebrate this fact through a variety of activities, including worship, singing, culture programs, sports and the fine art of eating traditional food.

The spacious church grounds in Asuncion offered us plenty of room to stage cultural performances, a banquet and impromptu games and activities. Several participants remarked that the sharing they had with both their old friends and newly-made friends was something that made this day very special. The joy that everyone felt found expression in the singing because each performer wanted to offer his or her best. The international team did several songs but it was especially when they danced the Waka Waka that everyone joined in by listening, smiling and clapping.

Football (soccer) is something that so many young people enjoy watching and playing. After the cultural program, we walked to a local field that was used for matches by both women’s and men’s teams. While Paraguay is a nation that loves football, many of the international participants were also experienced and talented players. This combination made for some fun and exciting, well-played games and helped reinforce this Sunday as a Day of International Friendship.

Our last day in Asuncion was filled with a wide variety of experiences that included a special visit to the office of Vice President Afara (read more below), a tour and interview with ABC media, shopping, and a time for evaluations and reflection. ABC is the largest media outlet in the nation and the interview provided members of our team an opportunity to share their story in the paper’s widely circulated Sunday edition.

Our last team meeting was a time for reflection and stimulating conversations as we touched on issues that spoke to our hearts. This was followed by writing commitment letters to remind us of what we planned to do when we returned home. A short graduation ceremony offered our project organizers -- Mr. Sano, Mr. Nakai, Mr. Guilianno, Rev. Pobanz and Rev. Gehring -- time to share their thoughts, hopes and inspiration prior to passing out graduation certificates.

Perhaps the highlight of the day was an emotional flower ceremony, a time when each person shared a special message with every individual in the room while passing a flower. The bonds that we had all formed through our shared and rewarding experiences were written in our hearts. The meaning of our declaration that we were “one family under God” was now something we would never forget.

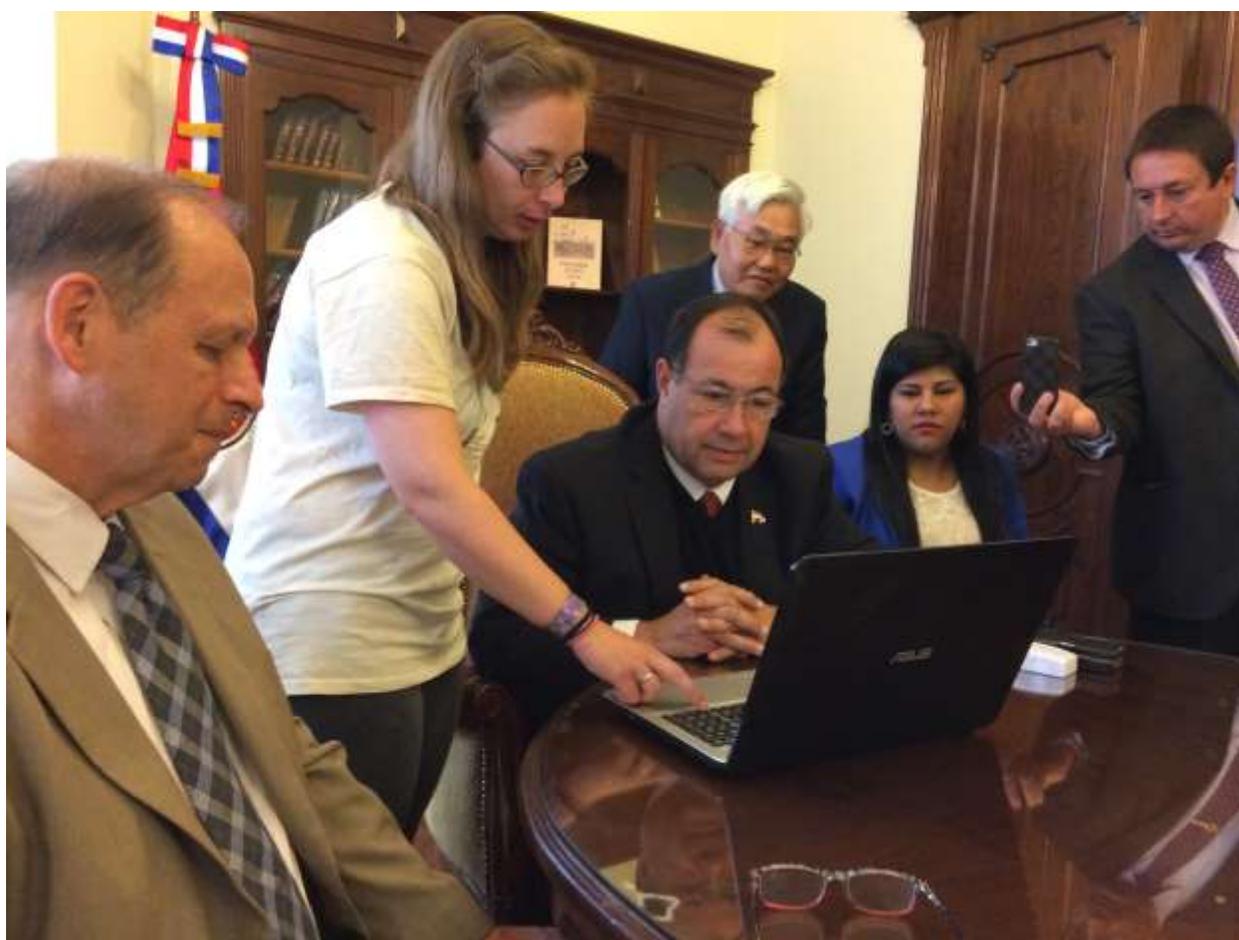


Special Meeting with Vice President Juan Afara

This is a short account by John Gehring of the meeting between Paraguay's Vice President, Mr. Juan Afara, and participants of the 2nd Pathways to a Sustainable Future Project.

Taking a picture with the Vice President of a nation, even one who is serving as the "Acting President," can be viewed as a simple public relations event. Over the past three decades, I have accompanied numerous teams of international volunteers in their meetings with high-ranking government officials. These meetings are often part of the daily protocol that such officials go through as they fulfill their public responsibilities. They serve as a good way for a leader to recognize a positive contribution made to his nation and are generally a means to promote goodwill. But our meeting with Paraguay's Vice President Juan Afara managed to become a more meaningful event since the Vice President had already built a working relationship with those at the Leda Settlement and he was actively seeking to understand more about what we were doing during our stay.

One distinct difference in our meeting is that we brought along with us three huge bags of taro plants weighing nearly 300 pounds. We had harvested these plants in the muddy fields of the Leda Settlement before heading to the capital Asuncion. Paraguay's Vice President Afara has a strong background in agriculture and is looking for ways to further develop his nation's economy, especially in the poorer regions. During his recent visits to the Leda Settlement, he became especially interested in the wide variety of taro species being grown there, as well as in the unique methods through which they were cultivated. The gift of taro was presented so that the agricultural department could research the qualities of the various taro species being raised in Leda.



When our group of mostly young representatives, hailing from 12 nations, gathered in the office of the Vice President, we were met by a man genuinely interested in why we had traveled from around the world to the distant Chaco Region of his country. What was our motivation? What was it that we were able to do? Was our experience one that encouraged us to return to our countries and tell our friends and family about the good people and things they discovered in Paraguay? Vice President Afara sat patiently as participant Mira Brown narrated a presentation of 40 representative pictures of the group's activities.

As the presentation continued, participants enjoyed the tasty Paraguayan snacks that were distributed to everyone. Once the slides concluded, the Vice President offered his thanks, and posed a number of friendly inquiries. After several personal introductions, he made himself available for both the formal and informal pictures. The short meeting stretched to 30 minutes, during which Acting President Afara's phone rang a number of times, but he chose instead to focus on the people in the room.

The Vice President's final remarks made us all feel appreciated. We walked out of the room and into the corridors, sharing excitedly about our opportunity to meet the Vice President of Paraguay. It took a few moments to realize that important business was transpiring in the surrounding rooms before we settled down into quieter but upbeat exchanges.

After our meeting, we were told that on his last visit to the Leda Settlement he offered the community a much-needed grinding machine for the taro root. While this kind of support is welcomed, it also

especially highlighted a new level of recognition that is being established through the work of the pioneers at the Leda Settlement.



Today, in greater numbers, people at all levels of society are coming to recognize the Leda Settlement's pioneering efforts as the realization of an important part of Rev. Sun Myung Moon's global vision and inspiration. The Founder's insights in regard to fighting world hunger have often been overlooked by the media and other sources. Yet, in part, his vision and hopes are finding their fulfillment in the South American nation of Paraguay. It is also the growing hope of people such as Vice President Afara that the Founder's vision will continue to be substantiated in Paraguay, as well as in many other areas of a world thirsting for peace.