ICWA
LETTERS

Since 1925 the Institute of Current World Affairs (the Crane-Rogers Foundation) has provided long-term fellowships to enable outstanding young professionals to live outside the United States and write about international areas and issues. An exempt operating foundation endowed by the late Charles R. Crane, the Institute is also supported by contributions from like-minded individuals and foundations.

Institute of Current World Affairs
The Crane-Rogers Foundation
Four West Wheelock Street
Hanover, New Hampshire 03755 U.S.A.

MJF-6
THE AMERICAS
Martha Farmelo is the Institute's Suzanne Ecke McColl Fellow studying gender issues in Argentina. Her email is mjf7@georgetown.edu.

"My penis was a little chick and is now an ostrich."

Exploring Gender and Adolescence Among Buenos Aires Teens

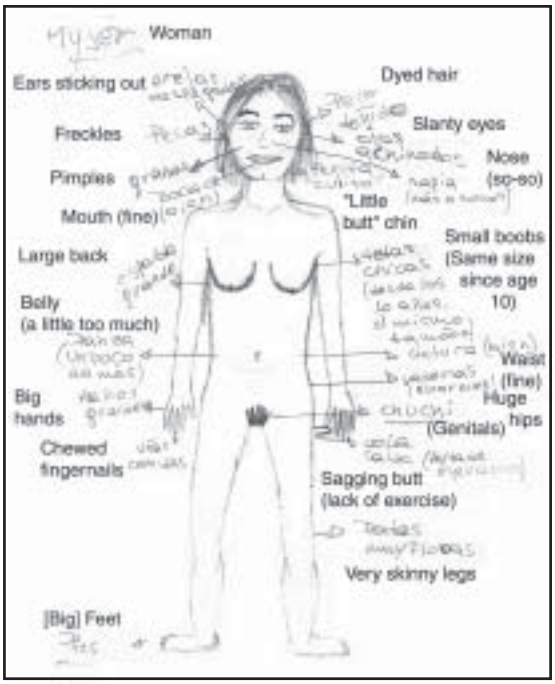
By Martha Farmelo

FEBRUARY 19, 2002

BUENOS AIRES - I felt sneaky and guilty as I peered over Monica's shoulder while she boldly drew a full-frontal picture of her naked, 16-year-old self and captioned it with her feelings about her recently post-pubescent body.

A life-giving cross-breeze ruffled through huge windows into the sun-filled room where nine boys and 17 girls in t-shirts and sweatpants sat in a wide circle on little wooden chairs. The youths had been asked to pencil images of their bodies and write short descriptions of what has changed and how they feel about it.

The scene offered a rich study in body language. Some of the kids relaxed back into wide open slouches, while others squirmed in a way that exuded discomfort. To my right, Analía, a chubby girl with messy, long, brown hair, bent protectively over her white paper. She tentatively sketched the outline of a plump female body, worked intently for a long time drawing the hair on her head, then speedily added a couple details about her breasts and genitals and folded her sheet in half, twice.



The hush in the room was remarkable. The kids had settled right into the task with almost no resistance and scarce giggles. The quiet was broken only by Mariana, a thin girl with big, brown eyes, when she sighed loudly, handed her pencil and blank paper to Emilio, the boy sitting next to her, and told him, "You draw me. I don't see myself."

The group consisted of youths aged 16 and 17 from three schools, two public and one private. Socio-economically they were middle- or lower middle-class—which in Argentina today means they usually have their basic needs covered, but probably little else.

The occasion was the second of four weekly sessions comprising the annual Workshop for Training Promoters in Reproductive Health and Sexuality. The kids had volunteered to participate and when there were too many volunteers, they were selected by their classmates in a makeshift election. The course is offered by the Center for Attention to Children and Adolescents of Vicente López, a middle-

Alejandro Villa is a psychologist, public health expert and social science researcher. As a man specializing in male gender roles in adolescent sexual health, he is a rarity, if not unique, in Argentina.

class municipality in the Province of Buenos Aires, just north of the capital city limits. It is the brainchild of Alejandro Villa, staff psychologist, public health expert and social science researcher. As a man specializing in male gender roles in adolescent sexual health, he is a rarity, if not unique, in Argentina.

The course objectives included: 1) allow adolescent boys and girls to reflect on their sexuality and how it relates to their identity; 2) discuss their evaluation of the risks of and methods for preventing unwanted pregnancies and sexually transmitted diseases, including HIV/AIDS; and 3) train adolescents as "multiplying agents" among their peers at school, in part to encourage use of free municipal health services, including condoms and birth control pills. Alejandro coordinated the workshops with two middle-aged gynecologists, Drs. Silvia Nélida Mancini and Beatriz Belloni. They were assisted by two graduates of last year's course, María Laura and Ariel.

Alejandro is careful to define sexuality beyond "genitality" (that which relates only to one's genitals) to include our male or female genders, sensuality, relationships and values about life and love—and our feelings about these things. Furthermore, this course was not sexuality education per se, but focused on personal identity, gender identity and how to help one's peers be healthy sexual persons.

One reason this course is so crucial is that numerous studies (and common sense) have shown that accurate information and constant cries from adults for "responsible behavior" are not always enough to change teens' sexual practices. Moreover, studies show that first and foremost, before parents, teachers or other professionals, youth talk to other youth about sex and sexuality.

The course is offered by the Center's Program of Support and Assistance to Youth Maternity and Paternity (PROMOPÁ), which Alejandro created and directs. According to the photocopied sheet folded in thirds that operates as the program's brochure, one of PROMOPÁ's goals is to "contribute to reducing the social inequalities between men and women related to sexuality and reproduction, so that not all of the responsibilities fall to the women, and that all sons and daughters have the presence of both their mother and father during their formative years."

In fact, challenging the constraints of socially-determined gender roles is at the heart of Alejandro's work, although that isn't always stated up front. His research has shown that many middle- and lower-class boys and girls explicitly strive to break from the *machista* patterns they grew up with, but that they lack places to discuss and learn about alternative ways of being.

Reproductive health is one field of international development in which the need for gender analysis is most widely accepted. A gender perspective recognizes that 1) power relationships between men and women are unequal, and 2) to improve reproductive health for both men and women, those power dynamics (around condom use, for example) must change.

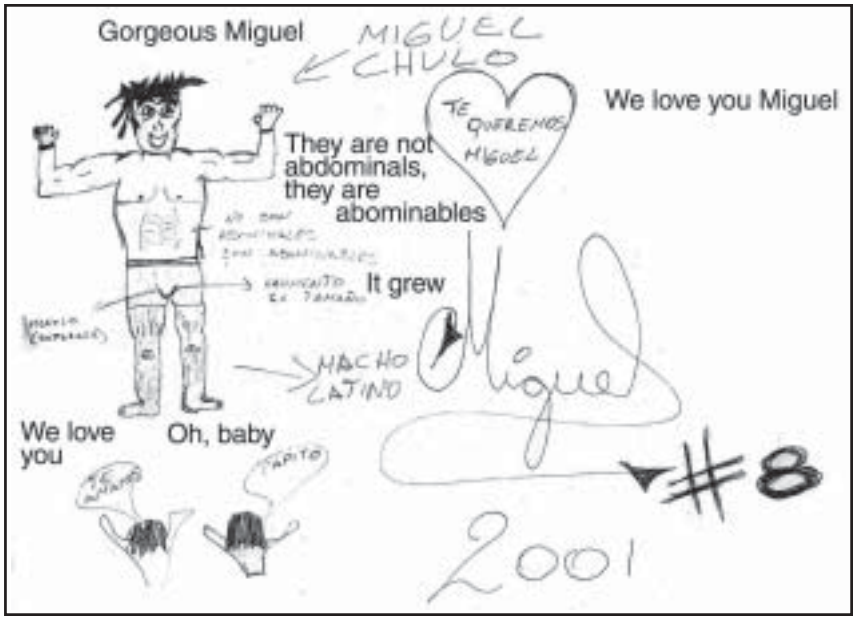
To better understand gender issues in Argentina, I longed to hang out with teens to learn directly from them about the dynamics involved in the evolution of their emerging gender identities. In other words, I wanted them to show and tell me what it means to them to become young men or women in Argentina.

I had almost zero idea of how to do this. Hang out in videogames arcades in the afternoons? Go dancing after midnight at the *boliches* (bars, cafés, or other hang-out places) teens frequent? Even if I made contact, how would I

Alejandro coordinated the workshops with two gynecologists, Drs. Silvia Nélida Mancini (second from right) and Beatriz Belloni (center). They were assisted by two graduates of last year's course, Marìa Laura (far left) and Ariel (far right). The two kids who jumped in the photo participated in a similar course for 13-year-olds.

get them to open up to me? How could I earn their trust?

In the end, I observed more than a dozen hours of conversation, arguments and skits. And I believe I did earn their trust, by being in the same room, talking little, listening respectfully and showing interest in their lives. Knowing them also involved sharing tasteless, dry cookies and watered-down Tang, taking their teasing and teasing back and eventually "*largando a hablar,*" or "shooting the breeze."



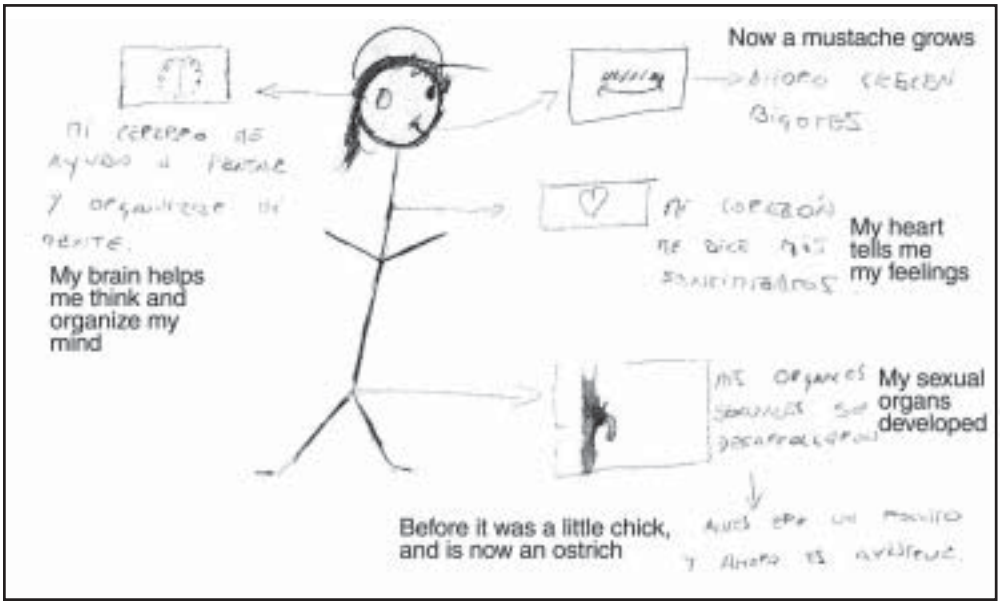
Seeing Adolescent Bodies Through Their Own Eyes

My very first glimpse (literally) into their gendered lives was quite intimate: their images of and relationships to their changing bodies. I was surprised at the candidness of their sketches and captions and their willingness to let Alejandro tape their largely anonymous drawings on the wall. I noted with curiosity that a larger proportion of boys than girls drew themselves clothed rather than naked. In general, the boys' drawings were less elaborate, even shyer. The one exception was Miguel, a skinny, macho clown who endowed himself with the physique of a body builder and drew young women reaching toward him and screaming, "We love you!" (*Te queremos!*) and "Oh, Baby!" (*Papito!*). One boy sketched a stick figure of himself with an arrow pointing to an enlargement of his genitals and added, "My sexual organs developed. [My penis] was a little chick and is now an ostrich."

The girls made colder assessments of what they like and dislike about their bodies. One wrote, "In the end, I pretty much accept myself, and if there are parts of me I don't like, I accept them just the same." More typical was, "Hips: huge!" and "Butt: sagging from lack of exercise." I couldn't help but feel I was seeing signs of the pressures that lead appalling numbers of adolescent, Argentine girls (and boys—a lesser but notable phenomena here) into eating disorders. According to the Argentine *Asociación de Lucha contra la Bulimia y la Anorexia* (ALUBA), after Japan, Argentina has the highest incidence of anorexia and bulimia in the world, and one in every ten female adolescents suffers some eating disorder. As many as five to ten percent of Argentine sufferers of eating disorders are male.

My sense of observing such pressures was reinforced by the complaint of one plump girl with big hips that it is almost impossible to find clothes her size, since shops simply don't carry them. I later read in the daily *Pagina/12* that this problem is so pervasive that someone brought the equivalent of a class-action suit to require stores to carry a wider variety of sizes—and won.

As they finished up their drawings, Alejandro handed out two condoms each for their personal use, which each teen accepted as casually as if they were extra pens or paper.



I admired the way Alejandro set the tone for open, uninhibited discussion. He drew them out with questions and reflections. He joked with them. He let them smoke, though only in a little room off to one side. He let them play music and when asked, fetched a boom box for their tapes. He let them talk freely and cut them considerable slack, even when a bunch talked at the same

time. He didn't try to be their friend. But it is clear that they respect him, feel comfortable with him and appreciate his interest in their lives and well-being.

The Influence of Adult Expectations

After the second session I observed, as we collected dirty plastic cups and baskets of cookie crumbs, I commented to Alejandro, "Sometimes I get the feeling their entire way of being is a function of what they believe the adults in their world expect them to be. Do you know what I mean?"

"Yes, exactly," replied Alejandro. "But think about what adults expect them to be: oversexed, overwhelmed by hormones, too immature to control their behavior, irresponsible and self-centered." This seemed to presage a fairly strict conformity to stereotyped gender roles that did, indeed, emerge continually.

That day the kids had put on skits about what happens when a guy and a girl "get together." In one, Miguel is at a party, raises his eyebrows at two girls three times in a row and snaps his head a couple times toward one side. He then moves off to the left and lays down on the floor snuggling one girl on each side, intimating that he then had sex with both at once—presented as every boy's fantasy. In another, a boy named Sebastián stands languorously at a bar, winks at and walks off with a girl he doesn't know and disappears off to the side, intimating that they then had sex. In scene two, he is confronted by his furious girlfriend and tells her she shouldn't care. In each skit, casual encounters almost always involved alcohol and led directly to sex, sometimes with condoms and others without.

According to the First National Study of the Consumption of Addictive Substances completed in 1999, almost 60 percent of Argentine kids age 12-15 had consumed alcohol in the previous 12 months, and that percentage is closer to 90 for kids age 16-24.

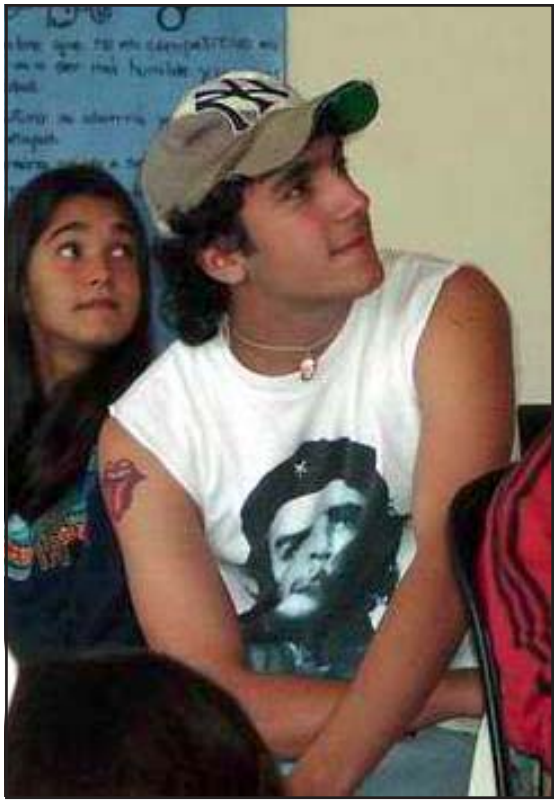
I felt like I was watching a caricature of most Argentine television, although there were exceptions. In one skit in which a guy picked up a girl he knew nothing about, he put on two condoms, one on top of the other. This led to a spirited debate about whether that's even feasible and if it provides extra protection.

During the post-skit discussion, I asked the teens to explain the meaning of *chamuyo* (pronounced "cha-moo-show"), a term they used repeatedly when describing encounters between boys and girls. "*Chamuyo* is what the guy says to the girl when he's decided to pick her up. It's what he says after 'Hi,' 'What's up?' and all that. It goes like this: 'Wow, you look great. You have really pretty eyes. I love your hair.' Stuff like that. Then you ask her if she wants to go somewhere else."

Later conversations revealed the same: *chamuyo* is totally scripted and varies little to none from encounter to encounter. It's the same if the guy and girl are old friends or meeting for the first time. It's also a given: girls always wait for it and boys know how and when to deliver it. The mechanical nature of *chamuyo* reinforced my sensation that many youth in Argentina are simply living out some socially-created notion that they believe defines what their lives are supposed to look and feel like.

Later, Alejandro asked them why all the skits seemed to have quick sex in common. A couple kids said, "Hey, we just wanted to do something fun. You asked us to put on a skit so we wanted to do something cool and entertaining." Alejandro encouraged them to think about what society expects of them, and to compare that with who they are inside. It was hard to tell if they got it.

Rather than analyze society's expectations of teens, I wanted to cut to the quick: What are these kids' personal needs and desires, as distinct from what they think and expect of each other? I was dying to call a time-out and say, "Just tell me, who do you want to be? How do you want to be in the



Sebastián (center) clarified that when he played the role of a guy who cheated on his girlfriend, he was only acting. "Actually, I would never do those things," he said. "That's just not me."

world? What kind of relationships do you want? What kind of encounters do you want?"

Then, decked out in a New York Yankees baseball cap and Che Guevara t-shirt, Sebastián chimed in while leaning forward, looking down and wringing his hands. "Actually, I would never do those things. I feel badly about that skit [in which he cheated on his girlfriend]." He then lifted and shook his head. "That's just not me. I'm not like that."

In response, a heavy-set girl named Marisa commented, "So what if I want to have sex right away? What if that's what I choose? Maybe girls want to be like that but we're afraid to say it. Some of us are afraid of the labels they'll put on us if we feel like we actually want sex. Maybe we even want it fast and easy." No one countered her. In fact, no one replied at all.

Are They Really Having All That Sex?

Their skits and discussions gave the impression that all teens are having sex almost all the time. I wondered if that was really the case.

The statistics are often contradictory. According to a recent article in *La Nación* encouraging parents to talk to their kids about sex, the average age for sexual initiation of both boys and girls in Argentina is 16—although the numbers I had gleaned from the academic literature said the average age is 14.5 for boys and 15 for girls. Likewise, the academic literature tells me that well over half of teens use condoms the first time they have sex, but according to a recent study reported in the daily *Página/12*, 62 percent of girls use no method of birth control the first time they have sex. Either way, Argentina has high rates of teen pregnancy despite an overall low birth rate. In 1999, almost a quarter of the assisted births in Argentina involved adolescent mothers.

Short of asking these teens straight out, I took a look at a poll they had filled out entitled "Survey on Sexuality and Reproduction." It was designed and administered entirely by graduates from last year's course, including Ariel and María Laura, the teen course assistants. Thirteen girls and six boys handed in their questionnaires.

Of the thirteen girls, only five said they had lost their virginity. Of those five, two did so before the age of 15. Four did so with their boyfriends, while one skipped over "Boyfriend," "Friend," and "Rape" to indicate "Other" (an acquaintance, neighbor, or family member, perhaps?). All five indicated that the first time was "Good" (vs. "Very Good" or "Bad.") Three of the five said they did it for love, while two said no. One said she did it out of fear of losing her boyfriend.

All five used contraception the first time. Two used condoms only ("Not bad," I thought), two used withdrawal ("Oh no," I thought), and one savvy young woman used both pills and condoms. Only three of the thirteen reported being currently sexually active, two to three times a week. One is on the pill and two use condoms. Despite initial male-driven *chamuyo* and corresponding female passivity, when asked who initiates sex, all three marked "Both He and She."

Finally, most of the girls said they want a boyfriend. Two added that they want a family, while one wants just friendship. One marked all the choices, including one-night-stands, *tranzas* (petting with out penetration) and "Other."

Of the six boys, all said they have had sex, one before age 15. One lost his virginity with his girlfriend, three with a friend, one with an acquaintance and one with "Other" (a prostitute, perhaps?). Only the latter called the experience "Bad," while the others picked "Good" or "Very Good." Only two of the six did it for love (the one with the girlfriend and one with a friend). All six reported using condoms.

Of the six, only two report being currently sexually active. Who takes the initiative? Of those that replied, two said "He," one said "She," and one said "Both." Five said they wanted to have a girlfriend or a family, while the sixth preferred a one-night-stand or a friendship.

So, are they really having all that sex? In sum, for

So, are they really having all that sex? For this group, the answer is, "not really."

this group, the answer is, "not really." Of the total surveyed, eleven have lost their virginity and eight haven't. Currently, only one quarter are sexually active and three quarters are not. Assuming their answers are truthful, their first experiences were mostly positive. Both boys and girls feel free to initiate sex, which bodes well for the sharing of power and responsibility, and they seem to use a lot of condoms. But there have been troubled times, too—things like having sex in order to keep your boyfriend, or having a first experience you later rate "Bad."

What Does It Mean To Be a Slut?

After *chamuyo,* another word I asked for help with was *turra,* which for teens translates basically into "slut," a term loaded with gender stereotyping and disapproval, even moral indignation. Controversy over what exactly is a *turra* and when it is appropriate to apply the term consumed an inordinate amount of the group's time and energy.

It seemed like every time we turned around, someone—either male or female—was using the term to refer to teen girls who appear to be sexually active, or just interested in sex. Alejandro encouraged them to see the danger of condemnation in such a pejorative term and in stereotyping sexually active girls as "loose" or "easy." In the process, he asked them to define the term, which caused a surprising amount of confusion. Only one boy responded to his request that they each, at home, write their definition of *turra* on paper. The result: "A little slut is a person who gives themselves easily and whose way of dressing and acting draws attention" (*Una turrita es una persona que se regala fácilmente y su forma de vestirse y actuar llaman la atención*).

Alejandro was explicit that being so judgmental flies in the face of the comprehension and compassion required to be effective "multiplying agents" among their peers. "Why is it that when a girl is fast and easy she is either all bad (as in you are a *turra*) or all good (as in 'why can't we do whatever we want?')," he asked. "How about looking more deeply at what is happening for her? Is she OK? Is there maybe something going on and she needs your help?"

When she heard those questions, a girl named Laura went ballistic. "Why do you only ask if she's OK if it's a girl whose having a lot of sex? Have you noticed that you never ask this question if it's a guy who's having a lot of sex?"

A couple of girls nodded their heads in agreement. The rest of the group was silent.

During the same session, I heard some girls make passing, vehemently derogatory comments about lesbians in their schools. I was surprised that there are girls out of the closet at this age—or maybe they're not gay, but because they are tom-boys or for some other reason they are categorized as *las locas* (literally, crazies). (In all the hours of conversation, the topic of gay boys or men never came up.)

Later, a group of girls began talking about peers who had become pregnant. When speaking of those who had had an abortion, they scrunched up their noses and looked as nasty as a cat about to spit. One came right to the point. "If a girl gets pregnant, that's her problem. She should take responsibility and take care of the kid."

Another countered, "But hey, what if your parents want you to have an abortion and if you don't they're going to kick you out and you're going to be sleeping in the park?"

A third chimed in, "Even then, if they throw me out, I can always find a friend who thinks like me and who can help me have the baby, or somewhere there has to be a family who thinks like me who would help me out."

Looking back at the surveys, eleven of the thirteen girls said they would "take responsibility" if they got pregnant (as opposed to having an abortion or "Escaping"). The other two didn't answer. All six boys said they

would "take responsibility" for a pregnancy.

Some of the guys pressed Alejandro on what he would do if his son, now 13, "got someone pregnant." He refused to answer, claiming he wasn't sure. "Give me a couple of years, you guys."

Dr. Belloni countered, "Of course you know, Alejandro. You would support him and accompany him." That was one of many moments in which I appreciated his influence as a positive role model.

The girls went on to express the belief that terminating a pregnancy damages one's future fertility. Since abortion is illegal in Argentina *and* they do not have much money, I couldn't argue that they were wrong. (I've been told that safe abortions are available, but I doubt they would be able to afford them.)

And I thought it was only ultra-Catholics and those older, dark-robed priests who make it so hard to entertain the notion of legalizing abortion in Argentina! Actually, I've read and heard more than once that the anti-abortion discourse among women in Argentina doesn't necessarily translate into an anti-abortion choice once a pregnancy occurs. Despite religious and legal sanctions, the number of abortions per year in Argentina is remarkably high.

During the break, concerned about the exchange regarding *turras*, María Laura told me that she used to think that sexually active girls were *turras*, too, until she became sexually active. She added that the course opened up for her the possibility of different types of relationships between men and women—and even between women. Given the judgmentalism described above, I was most impressed by her latter remark.

Resisting Gender Stereotypes: "We Are All Different! No One Is The Same!"

During one small-group exercise, Alejandro asked the teens to list all of the stereotypes of men and women they could think of, and who in society holds that opinion. Most was somewhat standard stuff: "men say that women are too fearful and sensitive, limit themselves out of fear of what other people think, and never have casual sex…Women say that men are immature, out of touch with their emotions, and interested in women for only sex." However, somehow the issue of what is lovemaking came up. And the answer that no one countered was, "For men, making love is what the woman does while the man gives it to her *(es lo que hace la mujer mientras el hombre se la mueve).* My oh-so-analytical response to that one was, "Yikes."

And if a woman "gives it to the man?"

"She is a *puta,* or slut" they said matter-of-factly. So much for intimacy.

Naturally, the boys and girls identified the standard stereotype that men are *machista,* and more than one said, "Actually, the whole society is *machista.*" A young guy named Manuel leaning against the wall insisted that it is mothers who make boys *machista*. "They buy their sons soccer balls and their daughters Barbie dolls and play-kitchens." His comment reflected similar observations I've heard often in Argentina, and his tone was one of honest outrage.

One of the stereotypes the girls brought up repeatedly is the dominated male, guys who supposedly are either controlled by strong women or fall under some female spell when they fall in love. Every single time this notion was mentioned, the guys were quick to defend themselves, saying, "Not me! I am not dominated!," except for one, who said somewhat in jest but mostly for real, "Only by my mother." A few teens chuckled, while others didn't flinch.

Well into the session on stereotypes, a bright, young woman named Maité interrupted the conversation. As she spoke, her eyes widened and her face became red.

"I'm tired of all this conversation about stereotypes, that all boys are one way and all girls are another way,"

One day Maité interrupted the discussion, calling out, "I'm tired of all this conversation about stereotypes, that all boys are one way and all girls are another way…it totally depends on each individual. We're all different! No one is the same!"

she said. "In my home, none of the men are dominated. They just aren't. And anyway," she went on, "it totally depends on each individual. We're all different! No one is the same!"

The group cheered and applauded, the only time I remember this happening. Their cheers gave me hope that deep inside they think much more independently than what they express in "public."

Maité didn't smile, and went on. "I also don't buy this stuff that everyone is saying about how if you're one way now, then you'll be a certain way later. Supposedly if you masturbate now, you'll be a dirty old man. If you like to party now, you'll be an irresponsible, philandering, unfaithful husband and father. I just don't agree."

Added to her her poise and maturity, Maité's outburst, her internal strength and clarity, left me optimistic about her future.

Another week, the kids again picked up the thread of the conversation about gender stereotypes. This time one girl called out, "But men and women *are* different!"

"Yeah," said the girl sitting next to her on the floor. Men play with balls and women do not. Men play with themselves and women do not…well, at least men are willing to admit it!"

So much for refusing to be pigeon-holed. Alejandro told me later, "It's as if it's impossible to hear anything but their socialization. This is just the voice of society talking through them."

Why worry about AIDS? My Parents Will Kill Me If I Get Someone Pregnant.

To my astonishment, according to the Government of the City of Buenos Aires, between 1997 and 2000, AIDS was the number one killer of young people age 15-34. Nonetheless, over several hours of conversation, it became clear that these teens were far more worried about pregnancy than AIDS. I heard over and over among the guys, "My parents will kill me if I get someone pregnant," even more so than the corresponding fear in the girls. Given that teen pregnancy is one of the chief obstacles to women's educational, economic and social advancement, I thought this fear was probably a healthy one.

Of course, as a result, while these youth may try to prevent a pregnancy, they don't necessarily practice safe sex. Condoms are a popular method for avoiding pregnancy—but so is *coitus interruptus.* In more stable relationships, if the girl is taking the pill, the pair will usually rely on that and skip the condoms. Others put the condom on too late, or aren't aware of the dangers of oral sex.

Indeed, their understanding of reproductive physiology, contraception and disease prevention seemed highly uneven. At times, I was impressed with their knowledge. One boy stated perfectly clearly that pre-ejaculatory fluid contains sperm and can cause pregnancy without penetration. At the same time, in the section of the survey on contraception and disease prevention, accurate answers were mixed with some frightening misinformation. One girl indicated her understanding that the pill kills sperm and that contraceptive creams and suppositories "eliminate the fertile part of the woman." More than one boy and girl said "false" to the suggestion that the condom must be put on before ejaculation.

Research shows that sexually active youth display far better sexual knowledge than non-sexually active youth, which may mean that they are more motivated to be informed. Still, the kids' clamor for information on contraception led me to believe that what they receive at school or other places is both inaccurate and incomplete. Not surprisingly, they seem to know more about anatomy than contraception. It is far easier to explain the ovaries and testes than the why and how of a diaphragm, sponge or pills.

And, of course, information does not always result in changes in behavior. It is one thing to understand how condoms work and quite another to have one on hand, actually put it on, and do so properly. At least they seemed to understand that AIDS is not just a "gay disease," and that men and women are equally at risk. That didn't seem to be the problem. A combination of four factors seemed to be the bigger obstacle: ignorance regarding transmission, the belief that only promiscuity leads to AIDS, the absence of teens visibly sick from AIDS, and the inability to visualize one's own death—especially in the context of a vital, loving relationship.

Alejandro does not believe in creating a culture of fear around sex and AIDS. But he *was* determined to counter those four factors and convince the kids of their risk of AIDS. To his credit, I believe he succeeded. Granted, his intervention bordered on a lecture.

He started out by stating the facts: HIV infection is on the rise among adolescents, heterosexuals and women. He also suggested they rethink some of their more judgmental notions.

"You think only whores and *turras* and gigolos get HIV, and that it's never transmitted in the context of a girlfriend/boyfriend relationship," he said. "Also, you may think that your boyfriend is clean because he's in the military or has a good job and must have been tested. Actually, testing in this country is purely optional, so don't let them fool you."

When they argued that he was wrong, I interjected that even for an Argentine permanent residence visa, HIV testing is optional. My comment ended that controversy.

"But if we're all healthy, we all seem fine, what's the

Alejandro pulled no stops when talking about HIV/AIDS. "The only reason you don't see sick adolescents is because people with AIDS are living longer," he told them.

worry?," Alejandro went on. "The only reason you don't see sick adolescents is because people with AIDS are living longer. You might be infected now and not show signs for ten years or more."

And in a very soft voice, even tenderly, "I understand that you may feel in love and have enormous vitality to love and to be loved…but you have to be able to deal with the reality that from those loving encounters there is the possibility of HIV infection and of your death."

This was the one and only time that the group sat still in total silence.

And then they began to shoot off questions. They asked no-nonsense, technical questions about AIDS transmission and prevention, and were not sheepish. They wanted straight answers to their real-life situations, even when it meant revealing details of their sexual activity and their confusion about it.

By the final session, at least one skit showed a cautious couple using a condom to prevent HIV and some of their work with collages told stories of young people being careless, getting AIDS and dying. Alejandro commented, frustrated, "Why does sex always have to be about fear and death? Why can't it be about pleasure and connection?"

Looking for Sexuality Education in Argentina: a Needle in a Haystack

I came to Argentina believing that sexuality education—whether offered at school or church, directly or in the guise of "health education"—is one of the critical mechanisms through which young people are socialized about gender roles and power in relationships. It could either reinforce traditional stereotypes, or provoke new ways of thinking about being young men and women, and about being in relationships.

According to a 2001 national survey directed by an old Uruguayan friend of mine, the majority of Argentines support sexuality education for young people. Nonetheless, each time I inquire about sexuality education in Argentina, I hear the same answer: there are only random smidgens carried out here and there by exceptional health professionals, extraordinary schools or a handful of non-governmental organizations (NGOs).

The Catholic church is one of the main reasons. "The church has incredible political and economic power," said Cecilia Correa of the Foundation for the Study and Research on Women (*Fundación Para Estudio e Investigación De La Mujer*, FEIM). "IUDs are considered abortive, though now you can get them," she went on. "It's illegal to have a tubal ligation and only recently a judge in the province of Río Negro had to intervene in order for a man to get a vasectomy. Only in the last two to three years has Argentina had AIDS campaigns that show the image of a condom." Alejandro had told me that state-funded, church-approved campaigns promoted fear, even terror, and the notions that sexuality is dangerous, non-procreative sex is a sin and AIDS is punishment.

Cecilia continued, "In 1995 the national "Responsible Procreation" bill died in the Senate largely because then-President Carlos Menem made a pact with the church to squelch all dialogue, debate, legislative initiatives and campaigns." That was about the time President Menem had cozied up to Vatican at the United Nations 1994 population conference in Cairo and 1995 women's conference in Beijing and opposed just about all measures related to sexual health. "For the church and politicians, reproductive and sexual health is synonymous with abortion," she said.

For all intents and purposes, there are no existing policies on sexuality education in Argentina. More than one professional told me that the Federal Education Law makes passing mention that the provinces are supposed to develop and implement curricula that include sexuality education. In my exhaustive (and exhausting) review of the federal law itself I couldn't find that passing mention. In the basic federal curricular guidelines, I did find a few references to sexual education that were too vague to be helpful, such as the following:

> As for the reproductive function, some basic concepts will be reviewed, especially related to health care and sexual education of the youth…health education and sexual education are cross-cutting

themes that should be addressed in multiple ways, integrating strictly biological aspects with others of a social, cultural and moral nature.

Everyone I talked to said the law is ignored, anyway.

Similarly, there is a National Plan For Integral Adolescent Health (*Plan Nacional de Salud Integral del Adolescente*), approved in 1993. This plan provides general guidelines for programs to be implemented by the provinces. However, the plan fails entirely to address the need for gender equity in reproductive health, nor does it mention the obvious role of men in relation to sexuality and sexual health. In any event, it appears that very few health professionals are even aware of the plan. Those who are have only a vague notion of its content and generally ignore it altogether.

I also looked closely at a study of reproductive health services for adolescents provided in the quite progressive city of Buenos Aires. In 2000 the capital passed a "Responsible Procreation" bill that legislates sexual health promotion and provision of contraceptives in public hospitals. Given that more than 50 percent of Argentines turn to public hospitals for their health care—and that number grows daily as the crisis creates increasing numbers of "new poor" with no health insurance—their practices are highly relevant.

Actually, the capital has had a family planning program called "Responsible Procreation" since 1988, and Buenos Aires hospitals and their satellite health clinics have a long tradition of providing health services for adolescents. Still, no policy or program guides this work. Furthermore, sexuality education is usually nothing more than the information that youth get from the nurse or doctor, an invitation to a group discussion, or a pamphlet on hand in a waiting room.

Likewise, I took a close look at a slick publication put out in October, 1999 by Hilda "Chiche" González de Duhalde, wife of the then-governor of the province of Buenos Aires and now Argentina's first lady. As honorary president of the Provincial Council of the Family and Human Development, she found the resources to publish a 60-page "Plan Regarding Responsible Sexuality" complete with goals, objectives, strategies and a monitoring/evaluation plan.

During one of the first sessions, Alejandro handed out two condoms each for the teen's personal use.

In keeping with her family's close ties to the Catholic Church, the document states up front that life begins at conception and will be protected from that moment. There is almost no mention of adolescents or sexuality education. Of 14 sections outlining the problems, just one segment addresses the situation of teens and the strategies section contains a single mention that the education sector should plan activities addressing responsible sexual education. I was told the plan was never implemented, anyway.

Dr. Mancini, one of the gynecologists who assists with the kids at Vicente López, told me, "You do what you can with each individual who comes to the hospital. Mothers often bring their daughters when they begin to menstruate, and I try to engage them in conversation about sexuality, disease prevention and contraception. Whatever they come for, I do my best."

And Sexuality Education in the Schools? The Hunger for Information Goes Largely Unfed

Although youth are far less likely to talk about sex and sexuality to professionals than peers, several adults in the school system commented that kids express plenty of demands for information and support, directly and indirectly. When harried teachers need help responding to these demands, they often turn to the school system's social workers. Two Vicente López social workers named Mirta and Sonia told me of feeling totally unprepared to help these teachers who come to them wide-eyed and palms-up, or their students. As a result, they took a government-sponsored course on sexuality education, purely on their own initiative.

"Not everyone in the course stuck it out," they said. "Sessions lasted two full days per month for several months with serious homework and papers. They also delved into tough subjects like sexual abuse and sexual orientation, and some couldn't hack it and dropped out. Personally, we picked this course in part because it was free. The students were mostly professionals but there was the stray parent or grandparent there who was just concerned or needed help," they said.

"Everything regarding sexuality education is one-time and improvised," they added. "Nothing is organized and we have no policies to guide us. Teachers are supposed to impart certain biological information but many just can't deal with it and so conveniently 'run out of time,'" they said. "It's easy to run out of time with all the days we've lost to teacher strikes this year. [In the non-Catholic schools] there is no prohibition about talking

Miguel (far left), who endowed himself with the physique of a body builder, shows off a dental dam home-made by splitting a condom down one side. (A dental dam is used for safe oral sex).

about contraceptives, even the 'hard' topics, but most teachers avoid them for personal reasons."

No wonder the kids at Vicente López are so hungry for information.

Sometimes the schools call on NGOs for help. FEIM's Cecilia Correa is a member of their team of five professionals who do sexuality education. She also coordinates their National Network of Adolescents in Sexual and Reproductive Health. Like the kids in Vicente López, network members are trained as "multiplying agents" among their peers.

"When a stray school does provide some kind of sexuality education, it's usually just some basic biological information. They rarely address the broader issues of sexuality. In fact, for the kids, when you ask kids what is sexuality, they reply in terms of genitals and what you do with them."

"When I go out in the schools with an older doctor to do a course, I find the kids cling to me because I seem so much younger. In reality, the most effective teachers are their peers, which is why we've trained adolescents to promote sexual health among their peers by giving courses, doing radio shows or putting on *murgas* (colorful, traditional, street-theater-like musical programs with African roots) related to sexual health."

"We do sexuality education courses for kids ages 11-18 in the few, more savvy schools that ask us to come. Even when schools request our course, they generally want and expect biology, but not sexuality."

FEIM does a few dozen courses a year, still a drop in the bucket. Naturally they do very little work in Catholic schools. "We've been asked to do AIDS prevention with no condoms! It's impossible." (One day in Vicente López, Alejandro mentioned that the US government is aggressively promoting and funding abstinence-only sexuality education as its teen-pregnancy prevention strategy. Half the kids didn't believe it and the other half thought it was hilarious.)

I have made a note to try to learn what sexuality education, if any, the Jewish schools provide. This query is related to the larger question of how conservative or progressive is the Argentine Jewish community and what role it plays in various social debates. My understanding to date is still limited.

I started out wanting to ask about the nature of the debate about sexuality education in Argentina, but over time modified the question to, "Is there a debate about sexuality education in Argentina?" Cecilia confirmed my growing suspicion. "No, there is no debate at all." Not even among NGOs? "There is *something* of a debate among NGOs." I imagined it to be quite contained, in part because the majority of NGOs in Argentina seem to be struggling for survival.

"Very few groups do sexuality education," Cecilia added. "The most common work is that of AIDS prevention groups, which is generally limited to promoting condom use. Only a handful of groups ap-

ply a gender perspective, as we do."

What does that gender perspective look like? "We use gender to promote safe sex. For example, we address the fact that guys have lots of partners while women usually don't. We try to empower girls to carry and use condoms, which means breaking down the myth that if a girl has condoms it means that she has lots of partners.

We also introduce the concept of rights, since the kids usually have no idea of them at all," she said. "We start with the United Nations International Covenants on Human Rights, then work with the Convention on the Rights of the Child, and then with the Convention on the Elimination of All Forms of Discrimination Against Women (CEDAW, see MJF-3).

To contextualize their feelings about gender and relationships, I wanted to know: what are their horizontes, *their horizons, or possibilities?*

When discussing sexuality, do you address sexual orientation? "No, we don't. No one does. We really can't." I had noticed that Alejandro never brought up the topic explicitly, but made a point to talk about couples in terms of "*una chica y un chico*, [a boy and a girl] or maybe *dos chicos* or *dos chicas*." I remember thinking that while it was cumbersome to spell it out, this practice was inclusive and mind-opening.

Just like the undeniable reality of diverse sexual orientations, some issues emerge across international borders. Cecilia said, "Personally, I was shocked to hear from the mouths of some girls how badly they want to have a baby. Now I understand that in many cases of poor teen girls, having a baby is the only way to have something of their own. So we try to find out what their life project might look like and how a baby might limit that. We also try to combat the way that television—really all media, but especially TV—romanticizes sex."

That is a massive task.

What Is On the Horizon? Becoming Men and Women in Times of Severe Recession and Instability

Cecilia's mention of "life projects" echoed one of my most persistent and fundamental questions for the teens of Vicente López: what do their futures look like to them? What are their *horizontes,* literally horizons, or possibilities? It seemed to me that without a sense of their future, it would be hard for me to contextualize their feelings about gender and relationships.

Naturally, the four-year-old economic crisis touches almost every aspect of their current and future lives. The first clue I had was a dialogue the kids had about uniforms. A girl named Rosario asked the teens from another school why they always wear green. "Is it just a fad for you guys, or what?"

"It's our uniform," another said.

"That's no uniform," countered Rosario. "You wear greens of all different shades and fabrics."

"No one has any money, silly. The school doesn't get us uniforms anymore, and if they did, who could buy them? So they just make us wear green."

I have a vivid memory of the first Saturday morning in December, 2001 when current restrictions on bank withdrawals were first announced. At the rolling Las Heras park down the street, three boys no older than 15 wearing black, hard-rock t-shirts and leather necklaces and were sitting around a deteriorating, square, cement table with a chess board painted on top. The three were debating monetary and exchange policy, including the pros and cons of devaluation of the peso and dollarization of the whole economy. I was both impressed and saddened. They should have been kicking around a soccer ball and worrying about their plans for that evening.

Last year in the province of Buenos Aires, the crisis made a mess of the school year. Over the nine months, 40 school days were lost to strikes by teachers demanding back-pay. That's almost two months of class time.

One day I told the group that I was interested in knowing how they visualize their horizons and possibilities, which provoked a chorus of answers in loud and soft voices. Most of the boys in the room either looked down at the floor or hesitated a few seconds and then

started conversations on other topics. Only two boys spoke up. With enormous light in his face, Miguel, the one who had drawn himself with a body-building physique, came over to where I was sitting and told me he wants to be an actor. From across the room, another boy yelled out, "But we are all Argentines! As soon as we can, we're out of here!"

I didn't have time to even react, let alone reflect on what he said, until later. But had I been wearing a heart monitor in that moment, there would have been an extra blip on the screen.

The majority of those who spoke up were girls. Most said they feel they can reach their dreams. One girl wants to be a *psicopedagoga*, roughly a psychologist who specializes in learning issues (a term I don't think exists in the US). Another wants to be a kindergarten teacher. Another wants to study psychology and law. Their dreams are fairly gender-stereotyped, but in stark contrast to the boys, at least they have them.

Only one girl, Cristina, said she didn't think she could realize her dream: she wants to be an actress. When I asked why, she and Miguel explained in a round-about way that the world of theater and television requires specific types of people and is strict about who can be an actress and who not. I finally realized that they were telling me the problem is her weight. Cristina is not fat, but she is heavy.

Only as I write this am I making the now-obvious connection between the economic crisis and the fact that far more girls than boys have articulated dreams for future careers. I have heard repeatedly that rather than planning to just wait for marriage, girls are increasingly aware that they will have to work to sustain their families. Many are aiming for interesting, fulfilling jobs, which may help explain why there are more female than male university students in Argentina.

On the other hand, the economic crisis is also squelching girls' dreams. I overheard a chilling conversation between Alejandro and María Laura, the course assistant, who just graduated from high school.

"So, what are your plans, María Laura?," asked Alejandro. "Where are you going to study?"

"Nowhere," she replied. "I wanted to study tourism or international relations. There's no way I can afford a private university, but there's no way I can cut it at the UBA [University of Buenos Aires, a public institution]. I could start, but I'd be out of there in the first year." *La Nación* recently reported that more than half of the incoming students at the University of Buenos Aires drop out during the first semester.

"So what are you doing?," he asked.

"Nothing," she said. "I mean nothing…yeah, well, nothing."

The other course assistant, Ariel, is a young man about 19-years-old. He's been in and out of drug rehabilitation for the last few years, is slowly working to finish high school and is active in a neighborhood drug rehabilitation organization. I was surprised at the kids' scarce mention of drugs, though alcohol seemed to be a constant in their social lives.

Alejandro told me that at a recent activity celebrating arts in the schools, Manuel (who had complained about gender stereotyping by mothers) and Cristina (who wants to be an actress) put on a skit they wrote together on violence and drugs. Manuel played a teenage boy who is high on drugs and brings his girlfriend, played by Cristina, home to spend the night in his room. The boy's father finds them and tries to throw the girl out of the house. The boy grabs a gun, shoots the father by accident and then, sobbing, screams that he didn't mean to hurt anyone. Alejandro said watching the scene gave him goose bumps.

Course assistants María Laura and Ariel said, "Take our picture and call us 'los chicos que se cuidan,'" (the kids that use protection.)

Who knows where these kids will be in five years, or ten, or even two?

Consumption Consumes You

Just last week, I noticed graffiti on an apartment building at the corner of Uriarte and Guemes, a block from my son's preschool. The spray-painted message says *"el consumo te consume,"* or "consumption consumes you." This got me thinking about a

comment Alejandro had made in passing about how adolescents today are objects of consumption: they are barraged constantly with visions of material goods to consume; sex is something they consume; even their visions of themselves are something they consume.

"El consumo te consume," or "Consumption consumes you." Sex is something Argentines consume. Even visions of themselves are something they consume.

As I walked on to the subway, I recalled the collages the kids made from magazines to illustrate what happens when a guy and a girl "meet each other." In one or two cases, the couple met, got acquainted, became friends or simply went out to dinner. In the vast majority of the collages, though, the guy and the girl dressed to the nines and drove huge, new four-wheel-drive vehicles, ate at five-star restaurants, went home to mansions with swimming pools, had sex, forgot condoms and had a baby. Clearly, they seem to buy into the pronounced tendency in Argentine society for consumer goods to define one's identity and worth. They also seem to buy into traditional, scripted roles for men and women—at least that's what emerged when asked to do collages, in groups, at age 16.

Similar thoughts were echoed by Diana Fischman, a graceful and soothing woman leading the movement to promote dance-therapy in Argentina. Among the many dance-therapy groups she leads, one works with girls who suffer from anorexia and bulimia. She told me, "In Argentina, our lives are driven by consumerism. Sex is something we consume. Our own appearance is something we consume."

She went on, "Adolescents today are being raised by parents who are narcissistic, who don't know how to have relationships in general, let alone how to get to know their children. These teens have no role models for healthy relationships with other people and in many ways are totally divorced from themselves." she said. "No wonder you were dying to ask the teens in Vicente López to express what *they* want," she added. "I'm not sure they have much of an idea of what they want."

"I expected something much more Johnson and Johnson"

I have a soft spot for these teens. They exposed their conflicting feelings about their changing bodies. They adhered like super-glue to traditional, scripted gender roles, though several shouted out or murmured their frustration with gender stereotypes. The boys panicked about pregnancy, the girls pontificated about abortion, and they all sobered up into silence about AIDS. They strutted their knowledge of sex and sexuality *and* revealed an alarming lack of basic information on reproductive health. The boys spoke of exiting Argentina and the girls of grander dreams. In sum, as I hoped they might, they told me what it means to them to become young men and women in crisis-ridden Argentina today.

I now see all teens here through a different lens. Rather than fear, my reaction to groups of poorer-looking teen boys now tends toward curiosity about their internal lives, and even tenderness. Today two girls about 14-years-old in tiny bikinis at my pool fooled around in the water and generally got in my way. I spent the bulk of my 40-minute swim musing about whether their still-developing bodies have experienced sex…if they worry about pregnancy or AIDS…and how they feel about their emerging sexual feelings and about their futures as young women in Argentina.

It is also now impossible to avoid reflecting on the mammoth responsibility my partner and I share for eventually working through all these issues with my still pre-school-age son, Camilo. Such reflection leaves me feeling small and intimidated, yet also energized by the challenge.

Reflecting on our time together, a very earnest girl named Belén summed things up well. "I expected something a lot more like school, a lot more 'Johnson and Johnson,' a lot more 'Here are the parts of the reproductive system.' Of course this was much, much better. I'm glad I was here." ❑

The group. Belén, third from right (standing), said, "I expected something a lot more 'Johnson and Johnson.' Of course, this was much, much better."

INSTITUTE OF CURRENT WORLD AFFAIRS

Fellows and Their Activities

Wendy Call (May 2000 - 2002) • **MEXICO**
A "Healthy Societies" Fellow, Wendy is spending two years in Mexico's Isthmus of Tehuantepec, immersed in contradictory trends: an attempt to industrialize and "develop" land along a proposed Caribbean-to-Pacific containerized railway, and the desire of indigenous peoples to preserve their way of life and some of Mexico's last remaining old-growth forests. With a B.A. in Biology from Oberlin, Wendy has worked as a communications coordinator for Grassroots International and national campaign director for Infact, a corporate accountability organization.

Martha Farmelo (April 2001- 2003) • **ARGENTINA**
A Georgetown graduate (major: psychology; minor, Spanish) with a Master's in Public Affairs from the Woodrow Wilson School at Princeton, Martha is the Institute's Suzanne Ecke McColl Fellow studying gender issues in Argentina. Married to an Argentine economist and mother of a small son, she will be focusing on both genders, which is immensely important in a land of Italo/Latino machismo. Martha has been involved with Latin America all her professional life, having worked with Catholic Relief Services and the Inter-American Development Bank in Costa Rica, with Human Rights Watch in Ecuador and the Inter-American Foundation in El Salvador, Uruguay and at the UN World Conference on Women in Beijing.

Curt Gabrielson (December 2000 - 2002) • **EAST TIMOR**
With a Missouri farm background and an MIT degree in physics, Curt is spending two years in East Timor, watching the new nation create an education system of its own out of the ashes of the Indonesian system. Since finishing MIT in 1993, Curt has focused on delivering inexpensive and culturally relevant hands-on science education to minority and low-income students. Based at the Teacher Institute of the Exploratorium in San Francisco, he has worked with youth and teachers in Beijing, Tibet, and the Mexican agricultural town of Watsonville, California.

Peter Keller (March 2000 - 2002) • **CHILE**
Public affairs officer at Redwood National Park and a park planner at Yosemite National Park before his fellowship, Peter holds a B.S. in Recreation Resource Management from the University of Montana and a Masters in Environmental Law from the Vermont Law School. As a John Miller Musser Memorial Forest & Society Fellow, he is spending two years in Chile and Argentina comparing the operations of parks and forest reserves controlled by the Chilean and Argentine governments to those controlled by private persons and non-governmental organizations.

Leena Khan (April 2001-2003) • **PAKISTAN**
A U.S. lawyer previously focused on immigration law, Leena is looking at the wide-ranging strategies adopted by the women's movement in Pakistan, starting from the earliest days in the nationalist struggle for independence, to present. She is exploring the myths and realities of women living under Muslim laws in Pakistan through women's experiences of identity, religion, law and customs, and the implications on activism. Born in Pakistan and immersed in Persian and Urdu literature by her grandfather, she was raised in the States and holds a B.A. from North Carolina State University and a J.D. from the University of San Diego.

Andrew D. Rice (May 2002 - 2004) • **UGANDA**
A former staff writer for the *New York Observer* and a reporter for the *Philadelphia Inquirer* and the Washington Bureau of *Newsday*, Andrew will be spending two years in Uganda, watching, waiting and reporting the possibility that the much-anticipated "African Renaissance" might begin with the administration of President Yoweri Musevene. Andrew won a B.A. in Government from Georgetown (minor: Theology) in 1997 after having spent a semester at Charles University in Prague, where he served as an intern for *Velvet* magazine and later traveled, experienced and wrote about the conflict in the Balkans.

James G. Workman (January 2002 - 2004) • **Southern Africa**
A policy strategist on national restoration initiatives for Interior Secretary Bruce Babbitt from 1998 to 2000, Jamie is an ICWA Donors' Fellow looking at southern African nations (South Africa, Botswana, Mozambique, Zambia and, maybe, Zimbabwe) through their utilization and conservation of fresh-water supplies. A Yale graduate (History; 1990) who spent his junior year at Oxford, Jamie won a journalism fellowship at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies and wrote for the *New Republic* and *Washington Business Journal* before his six years with Babbitt. Since then he has served as a Senior Advisor for the World Commission on Dams in Cape Town, South Africa.

ICWA Letters **(ISSN 1083-4303)** are published by the Institute of Current World Affairs Inc., a 501(c)(3) exempt operating foundation incorporated in New York State with offices located at 4 West Wheelock Street, Hanover, NH 03755. The letters are provided free of charge to members of ICWA and are available to libraries and professional researchers by subscription.

Phone: (603) 643-5548
E-Mail: ICWA@valley.net
Fax: (603) 643-9599
Web Site: www.icwa.org

Author: Farmelo, Martha J.
Title: ICWA Letters - The Americas
ISSN: 1083-4303
Imprint: Institute of Current World Affairs, Hanover, NH
Material Type: Serial
Language: English
Frequency: Monthly
Other Regions: East Asia; Sub-Saharan Africa; Mideast/North Africa; South Asia; Europe/Russia

Institute Fellows are chosen on the basis of character, previous experience and promise. They are young professionals funded to spend a minimum of two years carrying out self-designed programs of study and writing outside the United States. The Fellows are required to report their findings and experiences from the field once a month. They can write on any subject, as formally or informally as they wish. The result is a unique form of reporting, analysis and periodic assessment of international events and issues.