



Autonomía, Libertad en Movimiento, A.C.

January/February/March 2010

"I never thought I'd be able to do this again."

When Ignacio was a boy, his father taught him the art of welding. Eventually, he turned those skills into a profession, which included automotive welding, painting and repair. Two years ago, his life changed dramatically when he was involved in an accident. It left him unable to walk. Initially, he didn't think he would ever return to work, and he struggled with depression for nearly two years. Very recently, however, he learned about the ALEM team and its workshop. He was integrated as a team member soon after and began welding and painting again, returning to those lifelong skills he had begun to develop in childhood.

As we reflect on the distinct and powerful impacts ALEM has made on its team members, both old and new, we welcome the year 2010 with many expectations, hopes and questions:

- *How has our perspective on life and our experiences as physically-challenged people changed?*
- *How can we contribute to a different perspective on those who are physically challenged: their possibilities and how they can integrate themselves into the productive network of our society?*
- *How have the people around us also changed?*
- *What new capabilities are they recognizing within us?*



These questions are constantly on our minds because they give direction to our work and push us towards the objective we hope to accomplish:

Promoting the physically-challenged as full members of the human social network; turning away from the idea that their existence is a 'problem' to be resolved; and making ourselves into agents of change in our society.

When the project began, some people believed that we wouldn't last one year. We were thought of as people who only want to receive and not give, who only want to be taken care of. ALEM has now been flourishing for the last three years, in large part because of the many people who have provided us with generous financial support, who have believed in the power of these 'dreams made from steel'. As Ignacio's story illustrates, ALEM continues to be not only a place of meaningful work for its team members, but a source of hope in times of great pain and difficulty. Viewed holistically, the workshop at ALEM simultaneously serves as a physical work space, a fun social environment, a place for learning and personal growth, and a network of support from people who understand the realities of living with a disability.

The project's success is sometimes attributed solely to its administrators. This ignores the fact that we have found a team of physically-challenged people who believe in the importance of that network of support and the meaningfulness of being able to engage in productive work. They are the true soul of the project.

These recent months have been a period of growth. We began manufacturing wheelchairs which we call "daily use." We learned that sometimes what we thought was a great design was not necessarily attractive to our clients; as a result, we had a few returned to us for modification. We embraced the situation even though we also felt a little bit of rejection. This made us aware, however, that we are not immune from doing exactly what we are struggling against on a societal level: that is, taking action without thinking and not listening to those we intend to serve.



When groups visit us - whether they are children, students, or adults - they suddenly become aware that their previous way of thinking about the physically-challenged doesn't fit with what they see at ALEM. They are forced to confront their old image of who physically-challenged people are and are not, what they can and cannot do. The change that they experience is inspiring. We see enormous value in this because something in them has clearly been moved. Without that movement, there is no possibility of change.

Our recent visitors have included a group of 45 children and parents from a local elementary school, who came in mid-February. "I was so surprised," one child told us. "I didn't know that people in wheelchairs could do something like this." They were eager to try out the chairs and even participated in a wheelchair race. In March, we were visited by a group of 20 Canadian students from Loyalist College in Ontario. They, too, were surprised to encounter an environment like this here in Mexico. When they were preparing to leave, one woman said, "We've had such a wonderful experience in Mexico that we really want to send another group next year and visit this project."



We return again our first question: how has our perspective been changing? There is no easy answer. Certainly it can't be answered fully in just one or two years. Ignacio's story provides us with some of the context we need to see our project from a new perspective, one which moves and shapes our own. As we move ahead in 2010, we will continue to reflect on this question, with the hope that its answer lies in the work we do and the changes we inspire in the people around us.

*" 'Hope' is the thing with feathers -
That perches in the soul -
And sings the tune without the words -
And never stops - at all..."*

(Emily Dickinson)

ALEM is a Project sponsored and supervised in partnership with [Karitas](http://www.karitas.org), a tax-exempt organization based in Pennsylvania. Additional information can be found at www.karitasfoundation.org. Contact Karitas president Howard Friend at hfriender@prodigy.net with questions.

Magdalena E. Solano H.
Directora de Autonomía Libertad en Movimiento A.C.

Peter Severson
ELCA Volunteer