Skills for life in Bolivia | Culinary arts for a brighter future in Rwanda | Technical training in India
You are a part of this transformation

Therefore encourage one another and build up each other, as indeed you are doing. (1 Thessalonians 5:11)

Each year, we choose a Scripture for MCC staff members everywhere to focus on together. This verse is our text for 2019, and I can think of no better words to sum up MCC’s work around the world in building relationships among partners, project participants, churches, volunteers and supporters of all kinds.

In this issue of MCC’s work with economic empowerment in Bolivia, Rwanda, India and elsewhere, you’ll read stories about encouraging and assisting people in bettering their own lives.

In Montero, Bolivia, teen Vania Chavez Abrego, after seeing her mother develop new skills and open her own hairdressing business, takes hairdressing classes after school and hopes to use her earnings to pay for university studies. She calls her mother her inspiration.

In Kolkata, India, Debasish Ghosh is learning to operate a metal lathe, training he could not have afforded without MCC’s help. Ghosh says he is doing his best to achieve his goals. He thanks MCC for supporting him and he says, “You are part of my life and I will never forget what you have done for me.”

I have seen the same tenacity that Ghosh and Abrego express in so many other people I have met through MCC’s work around the world. With assistance from MCC, entire communities are improving their lives for themselves and for their families.

You are part of this transformation. Your support encourages and builds up community efforts like these, serving as a foundation for MCC’s relief, development and peace ministries in 57 countries. This is our work together in the name of Christ. Thanks be to God!

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In Morang District in eastern Nepal, Rita Mandal uses the skills she gained through sewing classes run by MCC partner Brethren in Community Welfare Society (BCWCS) to earn money for school fees for her children and to help support her family. After completing training through BCWCS, she began working alongside her sister to design, cut and sew garments for women and to mend clothes. After about six months, she was able to purchase her own sewing machine and now earns around $30 or more a month from her sewing.

Ethiopia
Growing a flock
Around the world, MCC’s work to help people earn income often is woven with other efforts, whether in food security or education. Misael Hafu, right, shown with her mother Mulu Gabriel Hiwot, is part of an education project of an MCC partner, the Anna Hofer Education and Family Support organization in northern Ethiopia. About four years ago, Hiwot, a widow, and other students’ parents and guardians received money they could use to generate income. She purchased sheep, resulting in a flock that continues to benefit the family today.

Bangladesh
Access to markets
Finding new ways to grow crops is only the first step. Farmers also must be able to sell what they grow. In Bangladesh, an MCC-supported project with partner Gramene Unnayan Prakolpo provides farmers such as Abdul Majid with training on how to control insects without using pesticides. The project also set up a buying center to purchase pesticide-free vegetables from farmers and make them available for consumers, creating a market for the new crops.

Lend a hand — Comforters and blankets
GIVE HOPE AND COMFORT. A HANDMADE COMFORTER PROVIDES NOT ONLY WARMTH BUT ALSO A TANGIBLE MESSAGE TO PEOPLE THAT THEIR NEEDS ARE NOT FORGOTTEN.

Use new or nearly new material
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Winter weight preferred (please use new quilt batting)
Knotted with crochet cotton (not more than 4-8 in apart)

Purchased blankets (twin or full size) and new, flat twin sheets (for hospitals, schools and orphanages) are also needed.

Go to mcc.org/comforters to find a link to more detailed instructions. For drop-off locations, contact your nearest MCC office (see page 2) or go to mcc.org/kits.
Skills for life

MCC-supported workshops equip Bolivian women with practical skills to support their families.

STORY BY RACHEL BERGEN
PHOTOS BY MATTHEW SAWATZKY

It’s 6 p.m. and Irene Abrego Paraba greets a client outside her home in Montero, Bolivia. As the sun sets, she pulls a chair and small table from her house and deliberately sets down a hairbrush, comb, clips and a blow dryer. She’s ready to get to work.

Paraba furrows her brow in concentration as she blow-dries Moe Isakari’s hair, brushes it and clips sections to begin French braiding, creating an attractive up-do for a party. When she finishes, Paraba proudly holds a mirror in front of her client, eliciting a bright smile from Isakari.

Just a few years ago, Paraba’s life looked a lot different than it does now. The mother of five was in an abusive relationship with her husband and scraped together a bit of money by washing clothes for people in the community. Paraba says her children didn’t have a healthy diet. They were afraid of their father who yelled and sometimes hit them. The family couldn’t afford all their school supplies.

Paraba realized something needed to change. She left her husband and began to envision her life differently.

“I realized I needed to do something for my family,” Paraba says. “Modeling a different way of being a Bolivian woman is for my family.”

In 2011, she walked by a center of El Comedor de Niños (the Comedor), an MCC partner which has two children’s community centers and whose name translates as The Children’s Dining Room. The organization was started to improve health outcomes among children from low-income households and now provides care for children and workshops for adults. Paraba learned about the trainings available in things like cooking, baking, hairdressing, plumbing and electricity and even self-esteem and decided to sign up.

“I think I’d still be washing clothes if it wasn’t for the Comedor.”

Working outside her home in Montero, Bolivia, Irene Abrego Paraba styles Moe Isakari’s hair. Hairdressing provides extra income that she uses to support her family. Isakari, in addition to being a client of Paraba, is a one-year volunteer at MCC partner El Comedor de Niños through the Japan International Cooperation Agency.
To date, Paraba has taken seven different workshops, courses that range in length from five to 10 months, and she is using her new skills to supplement her income and support her children on her own.

Because of her experience with the training modules on electricity and plumbing, she was able to get a cleaning and maintenance job at the center. And the skills she learned in doing manicures and pedicures and cutting and styling hair mean that, on a typical weekend day, she can earn an additional $7 to $10 — more than twice what she would make for a day of washing clothes.

Now Paraba can afford to buy her children school supplies and fruits and vegetables. She says she’s also grown as a person and become more confident. “I think I’d still be washing clothes if it wasn’t for the Comedor.” Paraba says. “I think I’d still be a timid, submissive person.”

For the last 20 years, the Comedor, which has two centers in different neighborhoods, has worked to bring change to the lives of families in Montero.

Today the centers provide a safe place for children to go after school to have their homework supervised and learn about nutrition and hygiene. The children garden together, learn about fruits and vegetables and even take home a share of the harvest.

Skills workshops like the ones Paraba took fill an important gap in a community where finding formal employment is difficult and many people resort to selling produce, driving motorcycle taxis or cleaning.

But the Comedor also helps women face challenges beyond earning a living.

In Montero, women have especially high illiteracy rates and are sometimes subject to exploitation and discrimination because of their socioeconomic status and gender. According to the Center for Information and Development of Women in Bolivia, seven out of 10 women in Bolivia’s Santa Cruz region, where Montero is located, have experienced violence, often within their families.

Sometimes, husbands are reluctant to see their wives go to workshops at the Comedor or to start to think about working outside the home, says Nathan Toews of North Newton, Kansas. He and his wife, Leidy Muñoz, serve as MCC representatives for Bolivia.

“‘When women leave the home to go to workshops like the ones the Comedor offers or go to work, some men see it as a threat to the idea that they can take care of their own family,’” Toews explains.

The Comedor has psychologists who work with families, and staff plan activities that include husbands and fathers.

Trainings in self-esteem strive to boost the confidence of women and help them feel empowered in their families.

But another powerful way of promoting self-esteem and confidence is through the workshops on topics like hairdressing, electricity, plumbing, cooking and baking.

It’s a humid afternoon, and women clad in white clothes and hairnets gather around an electric mixer as an instructor cracks eggs and stirs in flour and sugar. They are making a beautiful dulce de leche cake.
They split the profits equally. More than 15 years later, the group is still going strong. (Read more about a participant on p. 10.)

That kind of long-term growth is what Paraba dreams of as she plans for her own salon. She’s slowly paying off a piece of property in Montero and wants to build a home-based business complete with a specialized chair, mirror and sink for hair styling.

Paraba’s daughter, Vania Irene Chavez Abrego, 15, is planning to go into business with her. The teen has been taking classes at the Comedor after school and wants to use her skills to earn enough money to attend university. She sees this as a way of reaching her goal of becoming a journalist, and her mother is her motivation.

“There isn’t another woman like my mother. I feel very proud of my mom,” Abrego says through tears. “She’s my inspiration.”

Rachel Bergen was a writer for MCC Canada through November 2018. Matthew Sawatzky is a photographer in Winnipeg, Manitoba.

Give a gift—Where needed most
Your gift supports MCC where it’s needed most around the world, including helping people develop new skills and find ways to better support their families. Send contributions in the enclosed envelope, give online at donate.mcc.org or contact your nearest MCC office (see page 2).
In 2003 I first came to El Comedor de Niños, an MCC partner which has two community centers providing care for children and workshops for women (and whose name translates as The Children’s Dining Room). My husband was the only one working, so we didn’t have much money. I left school in seventh grade and didn’t really have any skills.

Normally here in Bolivia, the husband works and the wife stays at the house. The mother takes care of the children and can’t leave the house because there isn’t someone to take care of the children. My husband is quite a machista (someone who has a strong sense of traditional gender norms where the man is the head of the house) and he didn’t want me to leave the house.

I went to the Comedor for a year with my children and took workshops without my husband knowing. I decided I needed to do this when I saw my children were suffering from malnutrition and being underweight. We didn’t have enough money to buy nutritious food, and we didn’t have enough food.

At the Comedor, my children were cared for and given snacks, lunch and nutritional supplements, while I took workshops in sewing and making handicrafts out of a colorful traditional fabric called aguayo. I also took a self-esteem workshop and learned to speak up for myself. In 2004 my husband found out. He never hit me, but he’s a very big man and spoke very forcefully. He would yell at me and tell me I couldn’t leave the house and got very angry. For those that knew me when I first came to the Comedor, I couldn’t even talk. I had a lot of shame in talking and I would sometimes cry. The change in me has been very drastic.

I told my husband, “If you don’t want me to leave (the house to take workshops) and be able to grow, I’ll divorce you.” He was very angry, so I went and made a report to the Defensoría de la Mujer (Women’s Public Defender, a state agency). We talked with a psychologist there, who talked with him about the children being cared for at the center.

In time, he saw that I wasn’t doing anything wrong by going to the Comedor to learn these skills and, actually, it was good. He changed his tone and his position and became repentant for how he was acting. He began to support me and eventually actually helped me with my sewing. He started to see what I was doing was not just for me, but was for the well-being of the family. It was good for him, good for the kids and good for me as well.

In 2008 I started working for the Comedor as a social worker with the children. I do that three days a week. During the rest of the week I make handicrafts out of aguayo with a group called Mujeres sin Limites (Women Without Limits). I’m the president of the group. We all met at the Comedor and now make handicrafts to sell at a market in Montero and at fairs around the country.

For me, the Comedor is not just the place where I work. It’s a home. I don’t ever think about leaving this place.

Maria Elena Algaranaz de Masabi participated in MCC-supported workshops at El Comedor de Niños in Montero, Bolivia. She now works with a group of women she met there to sell clothing and other items they have sewn at the market and at fairs. She also serves as a social worker at the Comedor.
Culinary arts for a brighter future

In Kigali, Rwanda, an MCC-supported program is training students to work in a growing market of restaurants and hotels.

STORY BY MARLA PIERSON LESTER
PHOTOS AND INTERVIEWS BY OWEN MCCULLUM

Surrounded by shelves of bowls, graters and other tools of her trade, 18-year-old culinary student Alaise Mukagasana whisks vinegar into a dressing of oil, parsley, onion and salt, making headway on the day’s lesson on salads.

Over the past two decades, the number of restaurants and hotels in Kigali and other parts of Rwanda — along with the country’s tourist industry — has grown dramatically, and demand is high for workers with skills in these areas.

In 2016, MCC partner Mwana Nshuti, whose name means My Child, My Friend, added culinary classes to its vocational training program, offering new opportunity for people like Mukagasana.

Students start with food hygiene and safety, learn about storing ingredients and then move on to focus on certain foods — from fruit, vegetable and salad preparation to techniques for pasta, sauces, meat, bread, cakes and pastries.

“I get skills to prepare a buffet or to make a meal for many people,” Mukagasana says.

And at Mwana Nshuti she’s getting hands-on practice in those skills each day.

Instructor Gaudence Nyirasafari begins lessons at a blackboard in a classroom, guiding students through a particular dish or technique as they take notes.

By late morning, though, students are in the kitchen, focused on preparing the foods they talked about earlier.

“What I am excited about in my learning is practice,” Mukagasana says, “especially when I prepare (a dish) doing each and every thing.”
The combination of classroom time and kitchen experience “helps us to use our hands and our brains,” she says. That mix is at the heart of Mwana Nshuti—a combination of practical experience and specialized knowledge that can help a student step into a certain trade or business, often in a matter of months rather than years. But it’s only part of a recipe for success.

Vocational training programs also need to help students develop the range of skills that will best serve them in building a career.

At Mwana Nshuti, that means that culinary students, in addition to studying cooking techniques, take additional classes in entrepreneurship, customer care, math, accounting, English and Swahili.

“With entrepreneurship you find how to create your own business, how to (work with) your customer, how to manage the money you get in order to improve or get to the purpose that you have,” Mukagasana says. “Also, English helps me in communication with those who come to me who don’t speak Kinyarwanda. English will help us to understand each other better.”

English, French and Swahili are three of the four official languages of Rwanda. But most people speak Kinyarwanda, the other official language, best and use it most often. Being able to communicate with visitors who don’t speak Kinyarwanda is a selling point that helps graduates find a job or make their own businesses more successful.

So are the lessons in customer service, in customer care and in areas like cleaning. After two months, the hotel recruited her to work full time in customer service. “That’s where I’m still working now,” she says.

The job has made a powerful difference for Umwiza, who signed up for the program knowing her family could not afford university studies.

Before, she’d rely on her mother for anything she needed. “Sometimes she would buy it, or she couldn’t buy it,” Umwiza remembers. “So now I’m able to buy things by myself and I’m able to serve my family…” Those kinds of little things with which I’m able to help, I try to help.”

That financial independence is precious. Some men, she says, may take advantage of young women living in poverty, pressuring them to have sex in exchange for financial support. Because of her training and income, she says, she does not need to fear this exploitation.

Staff seek to provide more than just a caring, inclusive environment. Weekdays begin with a half-hour devotional time, a space that Umwiza treasures for sharing testimonies and learning about God together.

Teachers and leaders encourage and advise students in whatever struggles they may face. Umwiza recalls that when she was hospitalized after a car accident, “I loved the way they came and visited me.”

Today, as she works to build her future, Umwiza also is reaching out to care for others.

In addition to supporting herself, saving money to start a business and occasional help for family and friends, each month she donates a portion of her salary to help a widow with two children pay school fees. The 21-year-old dreams of one day teaching the culinary skills she’s honed to other women and is eager to learn new things, “In the culinary arts you can’t stop learning new things,” she says. “Every time you learn new things, those new things, new skills make me want to keep following my dream.”

For Mukagasana, the dishes that she and others learn to make at Mwana Nshuti, along with classroom sessions or visits to hotels and markets, all bring her a step closer to her dream—one day having her own restaurant and eventually her own hotel.

And she’s relishing the journey of practicing alongside other students and sharing ideas together. “I like to be with them,” she says. “And I see how everyone is busy in order to know about what we are preparing. It makes me happy.”

Marla Pierson Lester is managing editor of A Common Place magazine. Owen McCallum of Plattsburgh, New York, is serving at Friends Peace House through MCC’s Serving and Learning Together (SALT) program.

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Technical training in India

With MCC support, students in India gain access to technical skills, opening doors to jobs in manufacturing and industry.

“Education is all of these layers that empower a person to have a voice and have an active role in defining their life and contributing to their community,” he stresses.

In India, MCC currently provides assistance to nearly 400 students to help pay fees and buy textbooks and other supplies for vocational training programs in mechanical, civil and electrical engineering or in fields such as nursing and midwifery.

Access to training is only the first step. MCC also aims at improving the quality of the education students receive. In addition to supporting educational tours to sites such as factories, MCC’s vocational training program in India has funded efforts to improve vocational school libraries, to provide special coaching classes in English and math and to offer skills training for teachers. The program has paid for school equipment ranging from machinery to computers.

The Indian economy has witnessed significant growth in the past two decades, and demand is great for workers with skills related to manufacturing and industry. But students often struggle to afford these courses of study.

“My father is a carpenter and unable to pay my fees,” says Amrito Biswas, who is part of a three-year mechanical engineering technician course at Swami Vivekananda Institute of Science and Technology in Baruipur, West Bengal. “Through MCC’s help, I can do a training like this.”

Since MCC’s vocational training program began in 1975, it has touched the lives of approximately 9,000 young people studying in a variety of institutions in the Kolkata area and throughout West Bengal.

Courses provide a mix of classroom learning and experience working directly with machinery and tools. “My favorite part of this learning experience is the practical classes,” says Gulshan Burh, who is in his third year of a mechanical engineering technician course at Don Bosco Technical School.

The more of these classes he can do, the more hands-on experience he’ll get. “I want to learn more,” he says.

Burh has seen that other students who have completed their training at Don Bosco have found jobs. He's heard from graduates who have come back to the school to speak, and he knows that various companies recruit on the school campus.

The school estimates that about 80 percent of the trainees find jobs in various national and multinational organizations, and others are using their skills in their own businesses.

But behind these numbers are stories of students’ own determination and effort — whether it’s Burh’s enthusiasm for more experience or the perseverance others show in overcoming obstacles to complete their learning.

Take Ghosh. Each morning, he rises at 4:30 to spend more than two hours traveling by train to Don Bosco. He returns home after 8 each evening.

So far, though, he is on track to graduate in August of this year. “After receiving MCC support, my family is very happy, and I am doing my best to achieve my goal,” he says.

“Thank you, MCC, for all your support. You are part of my life, and I will never forget what you have done for me.”

MCC’s technical training program in India provides students with valuable skills and opens doors to jobs. Stories like Ghosh’s demonstrate the impact of MCC’s support.
In the morning, I brush my teeth and read, then get dressed and eat breakfast. I walk to school with my sister at 7 a.m. At school I study math, social studies, literature and grammar, religion, music, physical education, Guaraní (an Indigenous language spoken in the area) and English.

After school, I come to a community center of El Comedor de Niños (an MCC partner). I do my homework here and play. Sometimes we work in the garden together and harvest vegetables. My mom has taken workshops here in cooking and baking and she also volunteers in the kitchen. Since she’s come she’s gotten better at baking and she cooks more. What she learns at the Comedor she tries at home.

In my spare time I like to practice my multiplication tables and read. Sometimes I practice English.

My favorite food: salpicón (potato salad with carrots, chicken and mayonnaise)

My favorite subject: math

What I want to be: a businessman
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