

9 October 2007

Dear LUTSF,

My sincere apologies for getting this to you so, so late. I have no excuse other than being computer illiterate and running around after two scallywags.

I am an amputee. I lost my right leg in 1994 in India whilst travelling. I was trained by Candoco Dance Company from 1998 and danced with them on a professional basis from 2000 until 2003. I then took a break from dancing to have a family; I live on the South Coast with my partner and two boys. Charlotte Darbyshire and I went to Bogotá in Columbia from the 20th of March to the 18th April 2007. We were working in the oldest part of Bogotá, the Capital, in a dance studio and the performance we created was performed in a nearby theatre. The performance was named "Mucho Gusto".

The purpose of the project was achieved. The original focus was for us to work with land mine victims, which we did. We had a core group of young adults with varying physicality's, all had lost limbs due to mines, as well as dancers from around the country, therapist and dance enthusiasts. It was such a joy to work with them throughout the whole project. As well as working with the group we actually achieved a lot more than we had planned. The only downfall was because the project was so oversubscribed people were turned away. We could have achieved so much more if we had more time and of course more money. This has spurred us, the British Council and participants to try and continue with our work together in the future with both a trip back to Columbia as well as dancers coming over to England.

I suppose a suggestion that I realised from doing this project was that we should have gone for longer. What we were doing there was very new for people. It also takes a long time to acclimatise, take on new cultures and of course try to learn the language.

We are hoping to put the footage of the trip in some kind of sharable media that will be accessible.

I want to thank you with all my heart for giving me the opportunity to go to Columbia and do this project. It really was life-changing and an incredible experience. Without the help of LUTSF there was no way it could have happened. Best regards,

Welly O'Brien

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In 2006 I was approached by Charlotte Darbyshire to do a project with her working in Bogotá Colombia for a month this year. Charlotte is a dance teacher at Laban but was also a dancer and teacher in Candoco dance company. In 1998 I started a traineeship with the company and consequently became a full time dancer and teacher from 2000-2003. I stopped dancing in 2003 and have since had 2 sons. I felt dance had become a distant memory so being approached to do this project was really exciting for me. Because my sons were so little I was reluctant to leave them in England so with help and use of savings (and of course help from LUTSF for my ticket) my partner and the two boys were able to come so we took the plunge and decided to go.

The proposal for the project was to be three weeks of workshops with a mixture of participants and then a week with 20 of the participants culminating in a performance piece to be shown in a theatre in the city centre. The trip was to be vastly funded by the British Council whom looked after us brilliantly.

As with most of these trips the itinerary changed a lot once we had arrived, this did panic me slightly as I would be with the boys a lot less time than originally thought.

Meghan Flannigan whom lives, teaches and works in Bogotá (thanks again to LUTSF for funding her to initially go) had done a fantastic job organizing the trip and liaising with the British Council. Meghan had organised and set up studio space for us but due to so many people being interested in the project we did 2 workshops a day.

The participants varied from therapists, physiotherapists from all over the country, dancers from the university, dance enthusiasts, mixed disabled/ able bodied dance groups from around the city and people undertaking rehabilitation much of whom were land mine victims. As well as teaching during the 3 weeks both Charlotte and I took part in lectures, demonstrations television and film showings it was fantastic as a lot of people had never come across contemporary integrated dance before.

The overwhelming feeling we had from everyone participating in the workshop and toward the performance was one of sheer enthusiasm. They did every challenge or exercise freely and without resistance. After the three weeks of workshops 26 people from the two groups continued with us onto the final performance week. The people that stayed with us were mainly the participants based in Bogotá and the landmine victims whom were staying at a rehabilitation centre as they were from all over the country.

Brilliantly for us Jules Maxwell, renowned dance music composer, was in Bogotá too and made the music for the performance. He composed a piece with a musician/singer from Bogotá called Kenji. The music was beautiful and a real joy for Charlotte and I to have a original sound score created for the group after Kenji and Jules had observed the group working together. We were also blessed in having costumes made for the show.

The project culminated in a 20-minute piece shown in a theatre situated in the old city district to an audience openly invited. The queue for the show snaked its way down the road and around the corner. We had a full house of 600 and the mood was overwhelming. The dancers were brilliant and were rewarded with long and raucous standing ovation.

I think for me that moment brought about exactly why we were there and made sense of all the tricky points over the four weeks. We had the most fantastic time and Meghan was a rock; we could not have done the project without her. She and the British Council bent over backwards to support the project. Because of the determination, translation and generosity of the Bogotans we had the best time. It was a joy to be dancing again especially with Charlotte and even though it was limited to demonstrations- once on Colombian national TV! – it was great to be moving again.

As for my partner and little boys: I think they would be happy to have stayed in Bogotá forever. A lot of tears were shed on leaving and we are left with touching memories.

I wish to thank LUTSF for supporting my visiting to such a beautiful country filled with magnificent people. To be empowered again after being so long a stay at home mum has reinforced once again to me how important integration is in every day life as well as the performing arts. I feel with the project we empowered a lot of people and certainly opened people's eyes not only about dance but also about disability.

It felt like it was a very exciting time and we know work has continued after we left. We are hoping to return and carry on from where we left off.