

A Report from Bogotá
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I am a 2003 Tamalpa graduate from Colombia. Wow!! That feels good!! When I came back to my country in July 2003 I was very anxious about what I would find in relation to movement-based expressive arts therapy. I knew I wanted to translate the Tamalpa work into my language and to my people. My question was: What kind of work was already there in Colombia, or was my job going to be to open up a totally new field? To my surprise I found people (more than I

thought) working on an expressive arts approach, and, thanks to a dear psychologist friend, I got in touch with a beautiful center for the rehabilitation of people with physical disabilities — CIREC (Integral Center of Rehabilitation of Colombia). This center has a program that focuses on psychological rehabilitation through the arts. They have a space full of art materials and do free workshops in arts such as sculpture, wood painting, glass work, and painting. They also have specific expressive arts therapy workshops, where art is intentionally used for its therapeutic powers.

I started, with my friend, as a volunteer. The most beautiful and exciting challenges have come from the people I am working with: most of them are men who have had amputations because of accidents with landmines. They arrive on crutches, in wheelchairs, or without parts or all of their arms or legs. This is a sad reality of my country, which continues to be in a kind of war. So, here I am working with the Halprin life/art process with these wonderful and brave people, helping them heal somehow the wounds of war, insanity, and injustice. These people come to the city of Bogotá from little towns and villages all over the country. For the first time in their lives they can experience a space where they can express themselves creatively with any of the feelings or issues that show up for them around their disabilities, the pain of war, their losses, or their fears for their future.

For me the greatest challenge has been to see these people as having the same possibilities as any other human being with a full body. I have had to confront my beliefs and that has led me to ask them, when they do activities, to imagine movement even in their lost extremities, to see themselves again as a whole, proving that they too can keep on drawing, painting, writing, singing, sharing, communicating!

The “results” after each workshop are amazing. As Daria says, the work of expressive arts therapy works by itself! It’s very overwhelming for me to see that happening in my language and country.

Two women who for two months took our CIREC expressive arts therapy workshops showed me the true power of “the work.” They are Elquis and Vidalia, two beautiful Colombian women who live in the countryside many hours away from the capital city. One has an amputation from the knee down of her right leg; the other is in a wheelchair. Both are mothers who arrived at CIREC to learn how to use the new prosthetics that the center gives them, so they could then go back home and share their happiness about a new possibility of movement with their children, who were their only reason for doing all this.

When they first came to our workshops, Elquis and Vidalia were very depressed by all the difficulties they faced and so they drew that. They cried, they moved, they started feeling what it meant to relax, to close their eyes for a little bit of peace. They started enjoying that space a lot and asked: “What is this therapy that you are doing?” Then a wonderful surprise arrived. They both came and asked my psychologist friend and me if they could plan and themselves lead a two-hour workshop. Of course we answered yes. And my curiosity about what it was going to be grew.

Elquis and Vidalia planned it all by themselves, asking me only for the “relaxing” music that I played at the workshops. They personally invited their friends who were there for rehabilitation. But they also asked—and this was their main focus—the director and founder of CIREC, their physical therapists, people from the administration office, their doctors, and other people who had treated them to join them in the workshop. They took on the role of facilitators with such grace, responsibility, and enthusiasm that I couldn’t hold back my tears of emotion.



Their two-hour workshop was shaped very much like the ones they had participated in with us, including some relaxation time with eyes closed, guided by them, as well as drawing, writing, sharing, and so on. But the unique stamp of their amazing creativity came from the way they started the workshop. They had us all sit in a circle, and Elquis went around with a bag full of slips of papers, asking us each to take one. On each piece of paper, they had written specific physical disabilities like “lost right leg from knee down,” “lost two arms from shoulders down,” or “paralyzed from hips down.” After that the instruction for the next two hours of the workshop was for each of us to assume that disability as if we really had it. They asked us to draw, write, and do the rest of the workshop with the physical disability we had picked up from the piece of paper. They were really on the alert, reminding us if we suddenly cheated or forgot!

Two things stood out for me from this exercise: One was their intention to make us feel in our own skin how they feel every day of their lives doing such small things as lacing one’s shoes, sitting down, writing, going to the bathroom—things we definitely take for

granted or don't even pay attention to. The other was their creativity in scoring such a beautiful workshop that came from the place of how they felt and what they wanted to share with the staff to help them in the rehabilitation process. It was a beautiful way to switch roles for two hours, in a very respectful and creative way.



The workshop was an absolute success, and they got absolutely motivated to continue it in their hometowns, where there are more people suffering from amputations because of landmines who are not able to go to Bogotá for rehab. When I saw them again six months after they left the center, they were doing great giving their workshops in their little towns, being great leaders in their community, and assuming an active role in their own rehabilitation as well as in helping others. These are

women who hardly finished high school but who are full of light to share, who are willing to seize the chances around them to grow and to make a difference.

In addition to continuing my volunteer experience with CIREC, I've been hired by another organization to give workshops to young people who work with children. The idea is to help eradicate child labor in mining zones of the country (for gold, emeralds, charcoal, clay) by offering an expressive and artful space for children after school so they can continue developing themselves as children and not have their rights taken away by having to go to work and quit school. These workshops are supported by the government, national institutions to protect families and children, and some international organizations. This is another example of my country's realities and the possibilities to work through this problem with an expressive arts approach.

I feel blessed to have had the chance to connect with people and places that are in the same way trying to make a big difference in my country's reality. From this work and especially from Elquis and Vidalia I've learned more about the power of Tamalpa and its tools. Tamalpa's generosity opens up a thousand possibilities to work with every human being no matter who they are or what they do or what their story is. It freely shares all its knowledge so that anyone who needs it can use it and create with it to make a difference in their lives, in the lives of others, and in their country's realities.