



WHERE RIVERS BIRTH THE SEA

Facundo lives in rural Paraguay, a landlocked country in South America where nearly 30 rivers define much of its borders and serve an important role in the life of the country. The name “Paraguay” may even mean “river waters that birth the sea” in the indigenous Guaraní language.

It is here, in one of South America’s smallest countries, that Facundo made a humble living as a gardener. It was work that he loved: orchestrating the interplay between soil, water, and sunlight, nurturing every plant with the care of a loving parent.

Unfortunately, Facundo (photo to the right) was forced to retire when complications from diabetes led to the amputation of his left leg. His wife of 56 years became his full-time caregiver, and the couple moved in with their grandson.

Facundo would do his best to move about with a pair of crutches, but it was difficult, and he was still unable to go to the doctor for follow-up care. Thus, he spent most days confined to his grandson’s home.

Facundo is one of the estimated 770,400 people in Paraguay who live with disabilities, with more than 146,000 having a physical condition that affects mobility.¹

¹https://www.paho.org/salud-en-las-americanas-2017/?page_id=147

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**FREE
WHEELCHAIR
MISSION** 20TH ANNIVERSARY

MEETING A NEED IN PARAGUAY

Paraguay's economy depends largely on agriculture; yet, only one-fifth of its land area is suitable for crops and most of this land is held by just 1.6% of landowners, whom the majority of agricultural laborers work for.² More than a third of the country's population lives below the poverty line, with two out of five Paraguayans unable to afford any kind of health care. This lack of medical attention, along with malnutrition, can often lead to disabilities: UNICEF estimates that 14% of children and adolescents in Paraguay live with some sort of disability, most of which were caused by injuries during childbirth.³ The most prevalent conditions affecting children with disabilities in Paraguay are paralysis and Down syndrome.

Only one out of three Paraguayans living with disabilities have attended school, which often amounted to little more than daycare. Consequently, people with disabilities in Paraguay have illiteracy rates six times higher than that of people without disabilities. Without an education or mobility, adults with disabilities have fewer

“LIFE IS BETTER WITH THE WHEELCHAIR”

With mobility, Rosario can now go to the doctor on her own and enjoy time with her grandchildren when they visit.



opportunities to make a living. A number of them end up living in institutions that may further hinder them from thriving.

To meet the growing need for mobility, Free Wheelchair Mission started sending wheelchairs to Paraguay in 2013. We formed a distribution agreement with Jesus Responde, a ministry organization that serves as our primary distribution partner there, importing containers of boxed wheelchair kits and storing them at their warehouse. Some of the kits are assembled and stocked at the warehouse for local delivery, but for wheelchair distributions in more remote regions, the wheelchairs are left unassembled in boxes for ease of transport.

These distributions are done through a network that includes churches, health centers, and municipal offices. Those involved in the wheelchair program are known as “mobilizers” and have been trained in correct wheelchair provision either by Free Wheelchair Mission through remote training or by distribution partners that have been trained and certified to train mobilizers in their network.

Before the pandemic, Jesus Responde would hold large wheelchair distribution events in bigger cities since 55% of people with disabilities in Paraguay live in urban areas. To meet the needs of the remaining 45% who live in rural, more remote regions, smaller distribution events would be held based on need. Regional outposts in the network would receive applications for wheelchairs, and once a single outpost approved 15 or more applications, boxed wheelchair kits would be sent by truck from the Jesus Responde warehouse to that outpost. Mobilizers would then assemble and fit each wheelchair to individual recipients, providing a gospel message and a Bible along with every wheelchair.

PIVOTING IN THE PANDEMIC

Our network in Paraguay had six distribution events planned for spring 2020 when the COVID pandemic struck in March of that year. Those living with disabilities were then left even more vulnerable, just as they are when other natural disasters occur.

² https://s3.amazonaws.com/oxfam-us/www/static/media/files/Paraguay_background.pdf

³ <https://www.scribd.com/document/349796900/035-Resumen-Del-Documento-Aproximacion-a-La-Realidad-de-Las-Personas-Con-Discapacidad>



MOBILIZERS IN ACTION

Our network of trained “mobilizers” delivers and fits our wheelchairs to individuals in need throughout the landlocked country of Paraguay.



A wheelchair would help them maintain social distancing or move away from danger.

In response to the emergency, our network in Paraguay cancelled large distribution events and began to visit individual homes instead. Following local COVID guidelines, team members would go house-to-house to check up on people, bringing them food and the wheelchairs they desperately needed.

When a new shipment of 520 wheelchairs arrived in June 2020, Jesus Responde devised new plans to distribute wheelchairs more efficiently while observing COVID guidelines. Meeting in a large, vacant parking lot, mobilizers and volunteers arrived in separate vehicles and parked at a distance from one another. They then began to meet with individuals at their cars and fit them with new wheelchairs. “In recent months, hundreds of people who lost their mobility—or never had it—have received wheelchairs from us, which has been a great blessing to them,” relayed a representative from Jesus Responde. “Together in Jesus, we can always do more!”

Because of friends like you, lives are being transformed by the gift of mobility in Paraguay—lives like that of Rosario (photo, opposite page), a 72-year-old grandmother who lives with her son in a rural area. Rosario lost mobility because of an undiagnosed injury to her lower spine, likely due to a degenerative condition. She would be left alone at home while her son went out to work.

Without a wheelchair, Rosario would move about the house by sliding from one chair to another, moving the chairs across the room as she went along. She could not go very far, and it was

exhausting. Now, with her new wheelchair, Rosario can not only move around the house by herself, she can also cook and enjoy time with her other children when they come for a visit. “I like to go on walks with my grandchildren,” smiled Rosario, who now enjoys an improved quality of life.

A wheelchair has also helped brighten the days of Facundo, the retired gardener. With his new wheelchair, he can resume doing what he loves and can often be found with a shovel and tools in his lap as he pushes himself along to do gardening work. He can also go to the doctor more regularly for the follow-up care he needs.

“In 2020, we were able to deliver 960 wheelchairs to people with no mobility and no resources to buy much-needed [items],” said Jesus Responde, “and we will continue to do it this year!”

Since 2013, you have helped us send more than 3,000 wheelchairs to the people of Paraguay and more than 1.2 million wheelchairs to people in 94 developing countries around the world.

Thank you for your prayers and support of Free Wheelchair Mission. Now celebrating our 20th year, our mission continues around the world, by God’s grace and with your continued partnership with us.



Blessings,

Don Schoendorfer, Ph.D.
Founder and President
Free Wheelchair Mission

AMBASSADOR SPOTLIGHT: CARLA WICKHAM

Carla Wickham is a member of Ustick Baptist Church in Boise, Idaho, which is part of a fundraising collective for Free Wheelchair Mission known as Idaho Believes. In 2016, Carla and her daughter, Kendra, embarked on a vision trip to Costa Rica and witnessed firsthand the impact that a wheelchair makes on its recipient. "One woman began to weep and cry out, 'Gracias, Jesus' with her hands in the air as she received her wheelchair," recalls Carla. "She grabbed my hand and said, 'I get to be a mom again. I get to cook in the kitchen for my son and help him get ready for work!'"

Moments like this moved Carla to take on the "4x4x48 Challenge": she ran four miles, every four hours, for 48 hours straight as part of our Move for Mobility this May. "Running in the middle of the night, in the dark, was especially hard, but I continually told myself that this didn't even come close to the challenges of lacking mobility in a developing country. It helped me push through, knowing I was getting the word out about Free Wheelchair Mission and raising funds for more wheelchairs."



Missed your chance to participate in the Move for Mobility? Contact us for ways to support Miracle of Mobility, taking place on July 22, 2021! For more information, visit MiracleofMobility.org.



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