



## Red Uniendo Manos Perú

September 22, 2008

Life for Children in La Oroya, Peru  
By Shannon Bridges and Kristin Kremer

We recently took our first trip out of the United States to Peru. Not long ago, we had heard about the Andean town of La Oroya where most children live poisoned by lead and we wanted to visit them.

In May, we graduated from the faculty of elementary education of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and we'd accepted the opportunity to teach English in Lima, Peru for a couple of weeks before beginning our careers back in the United States. One weekend we took a four-hour car ride to La Oroya, located just over the continental divide of Peru's central Andes.

As we got out of the car and set foot onto the dust painted land, our eyes began to burn and we started to cough. The tall smokestack where workers smelt the impurities of gold, silver, zinc and copper was just across the river from an elementary school.

There were children playing soccer outside under the billowing smelter. It stood high above them, an inescapable reminder of how small and defenseless these children are.

As elementary teachers, it was heartbreaking to discover that these children are being poisoned by the toxic emissions let off by the American-owned company, Doe Run Peru. In La Oroya there are around 12,000 children. According to recent Peruvian government health studies, ninety-nine percent of the children in La Oroya had lead levels three-times higher than the risk levels published by the World Health Organization.

Last year U.S. parents were outraged to discover the dangerous levels of lead found in their children's toys. The scare resulted in recalls of hundreds of thousands of toys. On the other hand, the air contamination spewed by the smelter in La Oroya produces a daily diet of lead, arsenic, cadmium, and other harmful toxins. Do U.S. parents know or care enough to act for Peruvian children?

"Marco" is twelve and lives in La Oroya. He wants to be a doctor one day. The lead levels in his blood are five times the safe amount and it is unlikely that he will reach his goal of becoming a doctor due to the harmful effects from the toxins he breathes. The contamination affects children the most because their brains are still developing and it also contributes to anemia, high blood pressure, attention disorders, and delays in speech and motor skills. In fact, children in La Oroya are born with lead already in their system according to a recent study published by Dr. Hugo Villa.



Like “Marco” there are thousands of children in La Oroya whose compromised health means that they will have fewer opportunities in the future.

Ira Rennert, founder of the Renco Group and owner of Doe Run Peru, also owns another smelter in Herculaneum, Missouri, on the banks of the Mississippi in the Saint Louis area. The Environmental Protection Agency was able to pressure the Herculaneum smelter to clean up its operations after several lawsuits and years of struggle. Families living around the smelter were relocated because of the dangerous effects of the smelter’s air pollution. Many houses were bulldozed after the plant was forced to buyout part of the town of Herculaneum.

In 1997 the Doe Run Company bought the smelter from the Peruvian Government and signed an agreement to clean up the La Oroya smelter and contamination by 2006, but the company asked for an extension supposedly due to lack of funds. However, in 2006 Doe Run sent back \$96 million dollars to Ira Rennert according to a study conducted by ESAN, the most prestigious business school in Peru.

We can’t help but to ask, “Don’t Peruvian children deserve the same protection from the effects of contamination as children in America?”

Instead of using his assets to clean up La Oroya, Rennert has used his wealth to maintain a lavish lifestyle, including the purchases of a mansion in the Hamptons and exclusive residential real estate in Manhattan according to the New York Times. Rennert’s personal real estate investments totaled more than two hundred million dollars. Had these profits been used in La Oroya, the facilities needed to clean the air could have been built on time.

Ira Rennert could do so much good for children by modeling corporate social responsibility, but what we see instead are missed opportunities.

To learn more about the children of La Oroya, tune in to CNN on December 11 at 9p.m. for Planet in Peril: Battle Lines.

To find useful tools for teaching children on health in La Oroya go to:  
[www.presbykids4kids.org](http://www.presbykids4kids.org)

What can you do to save the children of La Oroya? Join the Save La Oroya Campaign at  
[www.savelaoroya.org](http://www.savelaoroya.org)