

# The Ben Kohl Scholarship Fund of the LASA Bolivia Section

by **Linda Farthing**, Coordinator, Ben Kohl Scholarship Fund

After Temple University professor Ben Kohl died in July 2013, LASA's Bolivia Section, spearheaded by then chair Eli Monasterios, approached me about setting up a fund in his memory. I had received a couple of these kinds of requests to honor Ben, and I said yes without much thought, not realizing how the students that this initiative brought to my door would become such a part of my life.

We set up a scholarship committee with section members Nancy Postero, Chris Krueger, Guillermo Delgado, and myself, with backup from the section chair; because I spent more time in Bolivia than any of the others, I became the de facto coordinator. Our first step was to hold wide-ranging conversations about what the scholarship should be for, within the context that it should benefit low-income students with a strong commitment to social and economic justice. Bolivian academics and students repeatedly told us that the biggest obstacle low-income students face is finishing the theses required for them to be awarded their degrees. At a rough estimate, only 15 percent of all public university students graduate.

That decided what the scholarship should focus on. The next challenge was identifying potential recipients. We figured that if we publicly announced the availability of a scholarship we would be inundated with requests, so we opted to contact professors at public universities who could identify students for consideration. In fact, in a country where private scholarships at the university level are almost nonexistent, in many cases we found that the offer of money with no strings attached generated initial suspicion rather than enthusiasm among students; but once they had a look at the Bolivia Section

and LASA's website (in Spanish), these fears diminished. After a false start or two, we finally got underway in 2017.

Hebert Layme was our first student. He is clearly exceptional—already published in local journals with a thesis focused on the participation and inclusion of indigenous peoples in Bolivia's constitutional history from 1967 to 2009. He's the son of a milk delivery driver and a woman with a market stall. "I've loved history since I was a child," Hebert says, "sometimes much to the chagrin of my parents, who both hoped I would become a doctor or lawyer." He adds, "The scholarship enabled me to strengthen my connection to the Aymara indigenous movement and I want my research to help to them in some way."



Hebert Layme speaking at First Latin American Congress on Indigenous History, October 2017.

Hebert and our second scholarship recipient, Edgar Poma, organized Bolivia's first indigenous history conference at the Universidad Publica de El Alto (UPEA) in 2017. Edgar, who had to wait two years to defend his thesis because of internal departmental wrangling, "chose to study history because I find it fascinating, and I want to learn more about Aymara culture." He opted "to study marriage structures in my community Paco in Provincia Camacho. I interviewed community



Edgar Poma

elders about the marriages of their parents, themselves and their children and how they have changed over time.” Both Edgar and Hebert are now teaching at the UPEA and both hope to complete master’s degrees in indigenous history, although the cost is prohibitive for them both.

Neither of these two young men, nor the subsequent three other students from the UPEA, would have come to the committee’s attention without Felix Muruchi Poma, Ben’s and my longtime friend and collaborator (*From the Mines to the Streets: a Bolivian Activist’s Life*, University of Texas, 2011). Felix, who was teaching indigenous history at the UPEA, has a strong commitment to forming the next generation of activists and this translated into active engagement with the scholarship fund.



Jhocelin Caspa and her parents

This relationship enabled other students to get scholarships. After many obstacles in setting up a meeting to defend, last October Jhocelin Caspa became among the first women to earn a history degree from the UPEA.

Her research focuses on women’s participation during the 2003 Gas War in her own neighborhood of Senkata (which was at the heart of the uprising). Victor Mamani, who was working on a thesis on the history of public transport in El Alto, gave up trying to get



Jhocelin Caspa and Victor Mamani

his thesis defended (he had written most of it) but was able to graduate on the basis of his high marks in his courses (*modalidad de excelencia*) rather than a thesis. This reflected a move in Bolivian public universities away from the thesis requirement, which

has led to discussion in our committee about whether the scholarship’s focus should change in the future. Victor now heads the transportation division in the department (state/province) of La Paz.

Jhonny Quenta is the only UPEA student who hasn’t finished yet, in large part because of COVID-19 and the ambitious nature of his project, which focuses on primary research about efforts early in the Spanish colonial period in his *ayllu* in the north of Potosí to maintain local control over land. This research has never been done before, and Jhonny has hopes that this kind of investigation can help resolve ongoing boundary conflicts between local *ayllus*.



Jhonny Quenta in the Potosí archives, 2022

When I was in La Paz in May 2022, I met with four of these five students as well as Felix Muruchi and Sara Shields (who generously coordinates students’ monthly payments). The UPEA students spoke passionately about how much the scholarship had enabled the completion of their theses and expressed a willingness to help keep the scholarship going.

The scholarship fund is also active in Santa Cruz. In May, I traveled with another one of our *becadas*, Mónica Guzmán (who successfully completed her thesis on women’s participation in political decision-making in Territorio Indígena Multiétnico 1 in the southern Beni) to the Chiquitanía east of Santa Cruz, where she is researching traditional medicine for a Sucre-based NGO. Mónica is also active in the Museo Guarani, working as the volunteer coordinator of cultural and artistic activities for Guarani and Chiquitana women.



Mónica Guzmán Camiria



Nadia Sandoval

In Santa Cruz, Nadia Sandoval is a current scholarship student writing her thesis about the degree of recourse the Bolivian judicial system offers women who have been sexually assaulted. Dr. Nuria Villanova of American University has been providing her support.

Fausto Vargas is our other active student there. He faced challenges due to COVID-19 and is working in a carpentry shop to support his family



Fausto Vargas in the carpentry shop

but is determined to finish his thesis on cattle ranching, agriculture, and interethnic relations in the Alto y Bajo Isoso (the Chaco region south of Santa Cruz). These students have all received outstanding support from the fund's partner Jose Antonio Montaña, who teaches sociology at the Universidad Autónoma

Gabriel René Moreno (UAGRM) and is a longtime collaborator of Bolivia Section member Derrick Hindery.



Humberto Guarayo

Humberto Guarayo is our first student in Sucre, who is now finishing the final corrections on his thesis (on the design for cooperation and coordination between the legal jurisdiction of the Yamapara nation, the ordinary legal system and the agro-ecological jurisdiction in his home

municipality of Tarabuco). We have also had a student studying environmental engineering in Oruro, Carla Aquino. Carla is now working for the government on industrial and environmental security and is determined to pursue the dream she wrote her thesis about—improving plastics recycling in Oruro. Thanks to contacts through Bolivia Section member Guillermo Delgado,

Professors Dennis Garcia and Rene Nuñez (who sadly died of COVID-19) of the Universidad Técnico de Oruro were instrumental in making Carla's scholarship happen.



Carla Aquino López

Our latest scholarship student is Álvaro Rodríguez Antezana, who is a student of Roxana de Carmen

Abud Rivera and Dr. Roberto Fernández Terán of the Universidad Mayor de San Simón (UMSS) in Cochabamba. Álvaro is just finishing his research on communication and memory practices in the 1980s Movimiento Campesino de Bases (MCB) in the Cochabamba valleys.

The challenges have been many. Aside from student suspicion, we have been mired in departmental infighting, spent hours tracking down students who have fallen off the map, wrestled to get the necessary receipts for LASA accounting, and so on. We also have more male students than female (7 of the 11), another hurdle we are working hard to overcome.

The project would not have happened without considerable collaboration between LASA members and local professors, including Ben's old friend, artist, journalist, and professor Ricardo Rocha Guzmán, who has interviewed scholarship candidates in Cochabamba and Oruro, and my *comadre* Reyna Ayala, who tracked down La Paz students whenever necessary. Aside from the committee, the Bolivia Section presidents Eli Monasterios, Martin Mendoza Botelho, Nuria Villanova, and Ximena Postigo have all played a critical role, as did some 75 donations from section members and Ben's colleagues and family.

For those interested in donating, here is [the link](#). But what we mostly seek by sharing this story is to encourage other LASA sections and members to explore how you can give back as a group to the communities where you do your research. Our initiative is the first of its kind in LASA's history, and we very much hope it won't be the

last, but rather a step in strengthening LASA's commitment to the peoples of Latin America. Bolivia leads the way!

**Linda Farthing** is a longtime LASA member and an independent scholar and journalist. Her latest book is *Coup: A Story of Violence and Resistance in Bolivia*, coauthored with Thomas Becker (Haymarket, 2021). She has written and edited numerous scholarly articles and books on Latin America as well as writing for *The Guardian*, *The Economist*, *Al Jazeera*, *Americas Quarterly*, and *The Nation*. //