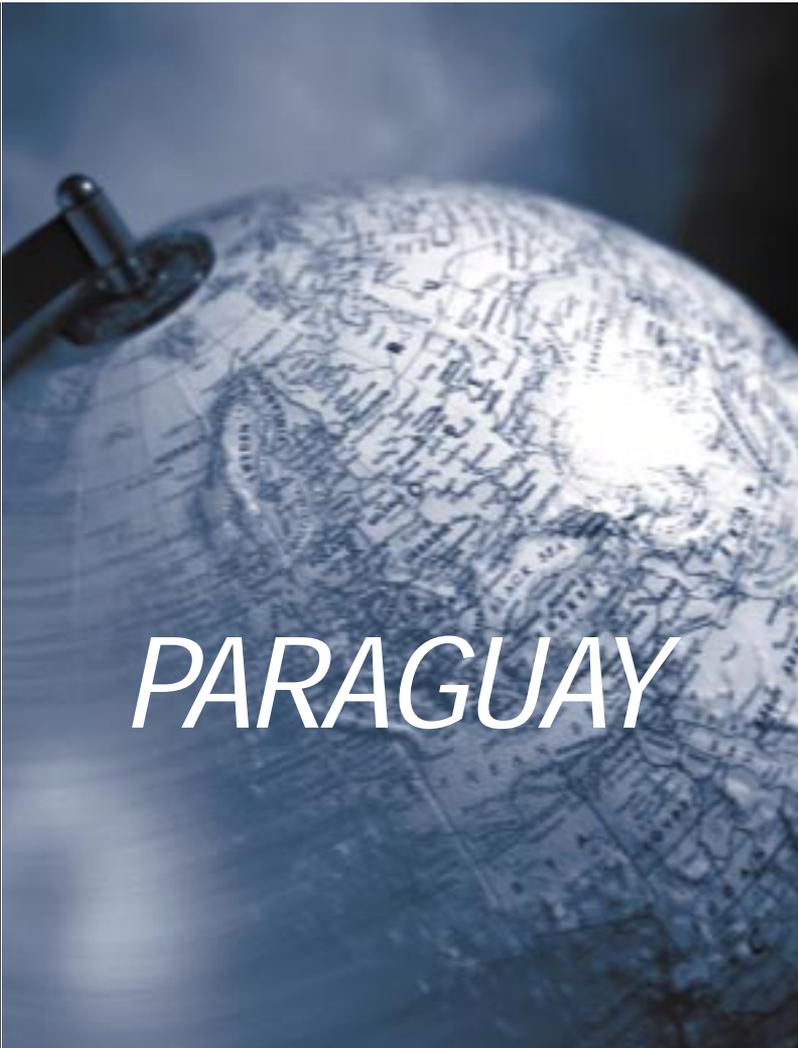


**LearnLink**



*PARAGUAY*

*Country Paper*

# Amic@s in Asunción

Summer 1999

# LearnLink

## The Bus Station

Enter the main bus terminal on the outskirts of town. It is a busy station, but not overwhelmingly crowded or noisy. The *amic@* is located above the main floor, away from the hub of activity below but still close enough for convenient access. The *amic@* itself is small; the computers stand side by side against one wall, and a large window lets in plenty of light and fresh air. Most of the visitors are young people who, at any given time, are at the computers exploring the internet, doing math exercises on CD-ROM, or chatting with friends around the world. A facilitator works nearby, ready to answer questions, offer assistance, or provide group training.

This *amic@* also attracts the attention of the children at CalleEscuela, an informal school and shelter for street children located around the corner. On one occasion, a group of 10- to 12-year-old boys and girls who sell sundries and shine shoes in the bus station visited the *amic@*, where they were introduced to the World Wide Web. After about an



hour of “surfing,” they held a cyberconference with Asunción Mayor Martín Burt using Netmeeting software. An exclusive chat channel was opened simultaneously, where messages and questions were posted. Focusing on issues of public concern, the hour-long conference included discussions of city-wide preparations for the impact of El Niño, traffic problems, municipal projects and plans for additional *amic@s*. The children were excited to be speaking to the city’s top official, though when he asked whom they would like to videoconference with in the future, the unanimous reply was Chilavert, Paraguay’s top soccer player.

*Amic@* stands for *aulas municipales de información, comunicación y aprendizaje*, loosely translated as municipal classrooms for information, communication and learning. Also known as community learning centers (CLCs), the *amic@s* offer a variety of telephone, fax, copy and computer services at the neighborhood level. Emphasizing the educational and civic development benefits of computers

and communications technologies, CLCs increase access to basic education resources, life-long learning opportunities and information services.

This first *amic@* will continue to serve as a pilot, where experimental activities can be tested, volunteers trained, and strategies for using computer and telecommunications technologies at the local level devised.

The CLC houses a server, printer and five multimedia PCs. A single-dial up telephone line and a proxy server provide



all the access necessary for this small center, which was inaugurated at a ceremony in January 1998, attended by the Mayor, U.S. Ambassador Maura Harty, officials from USAID and LearnLink staff.

## The Library

La Manzana de la Rivera is an art and cultural complex, headed by a leading figure in the museum community in Paraguay, that includes a theater, art exhibit space, historical museum, patio, magazine reading room and a public library. Recently, the Municipality and the Government of Spain renovated the adjoining park, making this area one of the most popular public places in the city. The *amic@* is housed adjacent to the library, a prime spot with high visibility, heavy traffic and easy access.

To ensure the CLC's smooth transition into the complex, this *amic@* focuses on public learning resources that integrate technology with what is already there. The opening ceremony demonstrated virtual museums, for example, showing how the internet could complement the actual museum nearby. Because of its location next to the library, the *amic@* also can integrate books with internet texts, adding features such as electronic newspapers to enhance the resources available to library patrons. Visitors are also drawn to the Center's English lessons on CD-ROM.

## Zoom in on Paraguay

### Geography

**Location:** Central South America  
**Area:** 406,750 sq km , slightly smaller than California  
**Environmental issues:** deforestation; water pollution; inadequate means for waste disposal

### People

**Population:** 5,291,020  
**Age structure:** 0-14 years: 39%; 15-64 years: 56%; 65 years and over: 5%  
**Population growth rate:** 2.68%  
**Total fertility rate:** 4.26 children born/woman  
**Infant mortality rate:** 37.39 deaths/1,000 live births  
**Life expectancy at birth:** total population: 72.23 years; male: 70.27 years; female: 74.29 years  
**Ethnic groups:** mestizo (mixed Spanish and Amerindian) 95%, white plus Amerindian 5%  
**Religions:** Roman Catholic 90%, Mennonite and other Protestant denominations  
**Languages:** Spanish (official), Guaraní  
**Literacy:** definition: age 15 and over can read and write total population: 92.1%; male: 93.5%; female: 90.6%

### Government

**Type:** Constitutional Republic  
**Population of Asunción, the capital:** 1,000,000

### Economy

**GDP per capita:** \$3,900  
**Inflation rate:** consumer price index: 6.2%  
**Labor force:** total 1.8 million  
**Unemployment rate:** 8.2% (urban)  
**Budget:** revenues: \$1.25 billion; expenditures: \$1.66 billion  
**External debt:** \$1.3 billion

### Communications

**Telephones:** 88,730  
**Radio broadcast stations:** AM 40, FM 0, shortwave 7  
**Radios:** 775,000  
**Television broadcast stations:** 5  
**Televisions:** 370,000  
**Internet access:** 10,000

*The World Factbook 1998*  
[www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html](http://www.odci.gov/cia/publications/factbook/index.html)

## The Community Center

The working class neighborhood of Santísima Trinidad is marked by a long tradition of community cohesion, making it an ideal site for the third CLC. This *amic@* is housed in an old building across the street from a model community center for the municipality where neighborhood club meetings, infant nutrition classes, and other kinds of events are held. One unique aspect of the Trinidad *amic@* is the inclusion of the community in the initial design phase of the center. Due to their unified spirit, the residents of Trinidad had already begun discussing their needs and plans even before *amic@* planners had visited the neighborhood.

## The Public School

The Municipality of Asunción manages only one primary school in the entire city. Located in the neighborhood of Marangatu Rape, this school houses the fourth *amic@*. Students and teachers now have more than a small public school library could ever offer — with

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*Thank you for not bringing me more books. Thank you for giving me all the libraries in the world.*

*Dr. Martín Burt, Mayor of Asunción  
January 1998*

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access to email, the internet and a series of educational CD-ROMs, they have an open window to all the information in the world.

## ORIGINS

Paraguay is relatively new to the practice of democracy and participatory governance. Since the turn of the century, periods of instability were followed by 34 years of limited political freedom and isolation from the global community. A military coup in 1989 led to free presidential and congressional elections, followed by political, legal and economic reforms. The new constitution, drafted in 1992, established a democratic constitutional republic. Today, Paraguay's national, regional and municipal governments are working to implement democratic systems, reform the economy and enhance human rights.

The *amic@s* were first conceived to work within the overall process of democratization in Asunción. They were viewed as a means to decentralize municipal systems and services, improve communication between citizens and government and strengthen popular participation in civic activities. The *amic@s* are especially geared toward less advantaged communities, providing them with access to computers, telecommunication resources, free email accounts, and the internet.

*...this project needed to be looked at in terms of social demand...to be tied into the daily lives of residents...The citizens should become our allies as well as feel a sense of ownership...*

*Sergio Aranda, Coordinator of the amic@s, speaking about the evolution of the centers*

The plan envisioned municipal centers throughout the city that would automate activities such as registering to vote, paying bills and applying for licenses, as well as create databases containing information needed for business development and research and provide citizens with opportunities for civic education.

Through regularly scheduled online chats with officials, for example, community members not only could obtain first-hand information on issues of concern to them but also could convey opinions. In this way, official functions could devolve to the community level, eliminating the need for people to stand in long lines at city center offices, while informing and engaging the public in democratic processes at the same time.

During the course of the activity, however, the *amic@s* have developed a mind of their own. Due to a combination of circumstances, including the decentralized nature of the activity, extraordinary community involvement and investment, a dynamic LearnLink advisor in Asunción, and unavoidable delays in municipal programming material, each Center has evolved in unexpected ways to respond to the particular needs of its immediate neighborhood.

Sergio Aranda, Coordinator of the *amic@s*, is reaching out to local communities to help shape the CLC program. For this reason, each Center is serving slightly

different needs and, as it assumes the personality and character of its surrounding neighborhood. Based on past experience, the newer *amic@s* are organized by management



Schoolgirls outside one of the newest *amic@s* in the neighborhood of Chacarita.



commissions made up of local community residents.

Opening ceremonies have evolved into neighborhood street festivals, including folk music and dance, balloons and flags, speeches by local authorities, and so on.

The success of the *amic@s* project has depended more on the enthusiasm, commitment and innovation of Sergio Aranda than on complex technology. Sergio is a highly skilled computer professional, and the project has benefitted from these skills. However, the success achieved so far is due as much to his commitment to the CLC concept and the potential of the *amic@s* to make a real difference in the lives of less fortunate citizens of Asunción as it is to his technical expertise.



Sergio Aranda, LearnLink Resident Advisor and Coordinator of the *amic@s*

## PARTNERSHIPS

Excite everyone. This is one of the lessons that has emerged from the *amic@* experience. The public, private and voluntary sectors have valuable roles to play, and collaboration among them is critical for success. Wisely, the CLC coordinator recognizes that all stand to gain from *amic@* involvement, and his “win-win” approach to partnership development is starting to bear fruit. For example . . .

### Planet Internet

Because services are free or nominal at *amic@s*, inventive ways of keeping the centers going with limited funding are necessary. Planet Internet, the second largest Internet Service Provider in Paraguay, has offered free internet connectivity for one year in exchange for placing PR materials in the centers. Because a free service will not be possible when all 12 CLCs are running, the long-term may include *amic@* training for Planet’s new customers in exchange for discounted Internet access. Creative collaborations will be fueled in part by the desire of a Planet Internet executive for people to have access to the internet culture. This is one of several private sector partnerships that bodes well for the future

sustainability of the *amic@s*.

## Maestros

Civil society abounds with exciting partnership possibilities, from formal NGOs with established mandates to informal groups of neighbors who just care about their community. Santísima Trinidad is one of the latter, where residents have a history of banding together to meet local needs. When presented with the prospect of an *amic@* in the nearby community center, residents recognized the potential benefit to their neighborhood and offered their energy and expertise to help make it happen. There is a range of skills to draw on, from residents with internet experience to knowledge of local history and needs to the maestros — the bricklayers, carpenters, masons and other workers from the construction industry who volunteered, literally, to build their *amic@*. No problem ensuring a sense of community

ownership is expected here.

## Peace Corps

The Peace Corps has been active in Paraguay for 31 years, with more volunteers per capita than most other countries. An exchange may be in the works that would enable volunteers to check their email from time to time in return for lending a hand in the *amic@s* as guides, trainers and office assistants. This is the kind of trade that meets the immediate needs of both parties and could lead to other exchanges down the road. It also could lead to widespread word-of-mouth publicity for the centers.

## Catholic University

A briefing about *amic@s* to professors and students in the informatics program at Catholic University inspired youthful enthusiasm as well as creative ideas for collaboration. The head of the department,



Preparing for the inauguration of the *amic@* in the Santísima Trinidad neighborhood

who is interested in the social benefit aspects of the projects his students undertake and not just the technology, was moved by the community networking movement and the need to demystify information and communications technology for people.

He and his students are considering ways in which they can help electronic networking efforts, including web site development, Y2K concerns, and of course the *amic@s*. An infusion of this kind of enthusiasm, coupled with interest from the private and voluntary sectors, is a show of support for the municipality that started the *amic@* effort in the first place.

## TOMORROW

As the *amic@s* are further developed and



Shoeshine boys at the bus station *amic@*

additional centers are opened throughout Asunción, this project could serve as a model for other developing countries. While there is certainly a vast difference among Latin American countries in the level of economic development and democratization, telecommunications infrastructure, societal and educational needs, and community learning center feasibility, the *amic@* experience is already providing lessons that can easily be generalized to other countries throughout the region.

### Behind the Scenes

The Academy for Educational Development's LearnLink project is responsible for designing and establishing Asunción's Community Learning Centers. Initially, the Joint Action Implementation Fund of the U.S. Agency for International Development (USAID) provided funding for six centers, which will be followed by six more supported by the USAID/Asunción Mission. It was LearnLink staff who wrote the JAIF-winning proposal that set the development of the *amic@s* into motion, and it is LearnLink staff who keep abreast of everything that is happening in Asunción with regards to the centers. LearnLink and USAID provide support, information and guidance to the *amic@s*. There is a constant two-way flow of information between Washington and Asunción.

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