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In Professor, Shoeshiners Find a Good Lawyer

By Matt Moffett
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LA PAZ, Bolivia — Shoeshine boys have such lowly status in this Andean metropolis that they hide their faces in shame behind ski masks. The children, known as lustrabotas, dart around like phantoms, dodging shop owners who shake them down and motorists who try to run them into the gutter.

But when American law professor James Cooper looks at these young outcasts, he sees foot soldiers for a revolution in Latin American justice. Cooper heads Proyecto Acceso, Project Access, a nonprofit group that uses innovative tactics to try to improve Latin America's notoriously weak legal systems and make the law work for the region's humblest citizens.

Cooper recently brought together 30 shoeshiners, between the ages of 8 and 17, for a know-your-rights seminar from a Bolivian Supreme Court justice and a banker who had once been a shoeshine boy himself. Each of the children got a pair of slick-looking pants with superhero emblems.

If the boys continue attending Acceso seminars and learn enough to chat up customers on the basics of the law, they'll get shirts and baseball caps emblazoned with human-rights slogans.

For the lustrabotas, receiving a gift was a big deal. Some of the children had been sent home or harassed by schoolteachers because their hands were stained with polish, or beaten by their parents for not bringing home enough money.

Clutching his new pants to his chest after the first seminar, Carlos Mamani, a 15-year-old who has had to contend with bullies on the job, said he had learned something about property rights. "No one has the right to mess with anyone else's shoeshine box," he explained.

Acceso, which provides specialized

training for Latin legal professionals as well as basic education on the law for the general public, is headquartered at the California Western School of Law in San Diego, where Cooper is an assistant dean. Acceso is a Spanish acronym that translates as: "Creative Lawyers Collaborating to Find Optimal Solutions."

Cooper, who goes by Jamie, takes the "creative" part of the title seriously. To highlight deficiencies in legal protections for Mexican workers under the North American Free Trade Agreement, he produced a reality TV

disenchanted with "making the world safe for McDonald's, Coca-Cola and Levis," he said.

Cooper's campaign to foster greater regard for the law in Latin America seems almost quixotic. In the barrios ringing La Paz, the police and courts are so discredited that residents hang dummies from light poles as warnings that lawbreakers will be lynched.

Bribery and intimidation by drug traffickers are so commonplace that judges sometimes face an ultimatum: plata o plomo, silver or lead, meaning they can either accept money for a

Chile has made the most progress adopting the adversarial system. "Jamie Cooper was very, very important in training the first group of lawyers in a system that was initially very strange to them," said Jaime Camus, an erstwhile Acceso student who is chief of an office of 22 public defenders in northern Chile.

Cooper, an amateur drummer, also used pop music to explain the new system to the general Chilean public. In 2005, Acceso, the German government-aid agency and the Chilean Justice Ministry produced a CD of justice-related songs, "Subele el Volumen a la Reforma," or "Turn up the Volume on the Reform." One tune took its title from a legal concept that wasn't very familiar to Chileans: "Presuncion de Inocencia," or "Presumption of Innocence."

The songs, written by lawyers and played by professional musicians, aired on radio, and one was performed by a local band opening for pop star Shakira before 50,000 fans at Chile's National Stadium.

"Jamie's got more energy than 10 people combined," said Irma Gonzalez, chief U.S. judge for the Southern District of California and a California Western trustee. "He's out there."

Sometimes, Cooper is a little too far out there. A man pulled a gun on him in Paraguay while he was working on a documentary about organized crime. In coup-ridden Ecuador, an Acceso training event was disrupted by an anonymous bomb threat, though that didn't halt the postseminar "Rule of Law Rave."

The shoeshiners in Bolivia weren't an easy audience. One of the children dozed off during a video presentation by Cooper. During the lunch break, it became known that the boy had barely eaten in a day.

Bolivian Supreme Court Justice Jose Luis Baptista, the main speaker, said he was pleased that some of the lustrabotas asked him pointed questions about children's rights.

'It's important to make these kids see that they aren't some excluded class.'

James Cooper,
California Western School of Law



show — which has run on TV in San Diego and at Acceso conferences — featuring U.S. law students laboring at a Tijuana toy-making factory.

The students earned \$60 a week for enduring harsh assembly-line conditions and environmental hazards.

In Paraguay, Cooper put on puppet shows to illustrate lawyering techniques. In Bolivia, he organized a fashion show in a women's prison — with inmates themselves strutting on a catwalk in the exercise yard — as part of a prisoners' rights project.

Another time, he put lawyers from Bolivia and Chile, countries that are historical enemies, together for a training seminar aboard a "Justice Train" traveling from La Paz across the Andes to the Chilean coast.

Before co-founding Acceso a decade ago, Cooper, a 42-year-old Canadian who has a master of law degree from the University of Cambridge, had worked for 15 months at the mammoth corporate law firm Baker & McKenzie.

It wasn't long before he had grown

favorable decision or get shot.

Acceso has been in the thick of promoting one of the few hopeful trends in Latin justice: the adoption in several countries of the more open, U.S.-style adversarial trial system. Acceso has trained 2,500 judges, prosecutors and public defenders in 15 Latin countries in oral-advocacy techniques used in the new system, such as cross-examination and the handling of expert witnesses.

Such procedures seem exotic in a region where trials were long carried out with written filings to an all-powerful judge — and where aggressive questioning is considered unmannerly.

Acceso training sessions combine a comic-book touches with case law, as many of Cooper's 20-odd multinational trainers and advisers take on superhero personas.

For instance, Lilia Velasquez, a San Diego immigration attorney who teaches oral advocacy, is billed as "The Flame of Justice," and dresses in bright red from her pants to her beret.