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Shoeshine Boys In La Paz Need A Good Lawyer

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Legal Project in Bolivia
Empowers Outcast Kids;
Mr. Cooper Gets Creative

BY MATT MOFFETT

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. Mr. 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.

Mr. 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

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