

## **The Rosa Vera Fund**

*“The impact magnifies and ripples in ways that I can’t hope to express”*

Jonathan Paul Lee-Melk, MD

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In the spring of 2003, Dr. Jonathan Lee-Melk had the opportunity to complete a pediatric elective as a medical student in Montero, Bolivia—an immigrant town where poverty and its consequences for pediatric health have a powerful effect on everyday life. As Dr. Lee-Melk embarked on his journey to Bolivia he had no idea that this trip was far more than a medical school elective, that this was an experience that would change his life. While in Bolivia, Dr. Lee-Melk met eleven-year old Rosa Vera Marino from an impoverished Quechua family that could not afford even basic medical care. Rosa was born with Tetralogy of Fallot and suffered from the advanced symptomatology of this cardiac disease. Deeply affected by Rosa’s medical and social situation, Dr. Lee-Melk began collaborating with his Bolivian colleagues while raising \$3,490 through family and friends in the United States in order to provide Rosa with the corrective heart surgery that she needed. Rosa underwent heart surgery in May 2003, but tragically died while coming off by-pass.

Shockingly, Rosa’s surgery, preparatory work, professional labor, supplies/equipment, additional heroic procedures, and ultimately, a dignified funeral totaled only \$1,740, leaving \$1750 for several successful medical/social interventions benefiting the children in Montero. The final dollars were utilized to finance a memorial celebration for Rosa Vera in May, 2004. With the rich experience of doing so much with so little, the dream of founding a permanent fund in honor of Rosa Vera began to take shape.

Dr. Lee-Melk collaborated with Curamericas, an American non-profit organization that has provided primary health care and practical health education to women and children living in poverty throughout Latin America and Consejo de Salud Rural Andino (Rural Andean Health Committee), a Bolivian non-profit organization that has worked to reduce the morbidity/mortality of poverty stricken communities throughout Bolivia. Through this collaboration, the Rosa Vera Fund (RVF) was formally launched. Given the overwhelming community needs and potential beneficiaries, the partners agreed in advance to a specific division of responsibilities. Under this agreement, the Rural Andean Health Committee (run by Bolivians in Montero) has sole responsibility for beneficiary selection and utilization of funds, thereby allowing Dr. Lee-Melk to focus on fundraising and promotion of the RVF within the United States. Curamericas provides the RVF with tax-exempt status, third-party fund donation collection, and assists in fund administration.

The Rosa Vera Fund provides funding for curative and palliative therapies for selected pediatric cases identified either through the Community Health Worker Program or by the network of three community health clinics. Some of the services covered are: consults with specialists, diagnostic studies, medications, physical/speech therapy, surgeries, therapeutic equipment, transportation, interpreters, and meals for patients and their families.

Realizing the importance of prevention efforts, funds are also devoted toward supporting the Community Health Worker Program, a grassroots health program that trains and employs women from the surrounding communities to provide critical prevention services, including home vaccination, malnutrition therapy, weight checks, family planning, health education, and follow-up on illness/compliance. The RVF supplements stipends, purchases uniforms and equipment, and provides educational assistance to promising community health workers (all of whom themselves originate from impoverished families).

The two non-profit partner organizations maintain a substantial morbidity/mortality surveillance system of the Montero community, which allows the resources from the RVF to be targeted appropriately. The partners collect data concerning the preventive programs and individual patient interventions on a regular basis in order to appropriately study the outcomes and thereby, continuously improve the efforts of the Rosa Vera Fund.

In addition to the collaborative efforts of Curamericas and Consejo de Salud Rural Andino, support from Dr. Lee-Melk's residency program, particularly from the program director, has been critically important for the success of this initiative. The opportunity to complete an elective in Bolivia during medical school lit the fire that created the Rosa Vera Fund, and the support from his residency program to spend an additional month in Bolivia working on the project helped to establish the framework and vision for the foundation that will guide the work of this organization for years to come.

One could not imagine all that Dr. Lee-Melk has learned through his experience in Bolivia and with the formation of the Rosa Vera Fund. He tells us he has learned that the value of a single child's life, regardless of economic class or nationality, is priceless to the family, the community, and to the future. Rosa Vera, her family, and her community taught Dr. Lee-Melk a great deal about fear, hope, love and ultimately, the loss of human life. He has learned that when a child dies it changes the present and the future of an entire community in ways that one cannot predict. On the flip side, the same occurs when a child's life is preserved. And, most importantly, Dr. Lee-Melk comments, "I have learned that a single pediatrician, working with dedicated and experienced partners, can make a difference." It is these lessons that give Dr. Lee-Melk the passion, dedication, and motivation to keep the Rosa Vera Fund growing and improving throughout his lifetime.

Dr. Lee-Melk is a 3<sup>rd</sup>-year resident at Phoenix Children's Hospital. He was honored with an Anne E. Dyson Child Advocacy Award in 2005 for his work with the Rosa Vera Fund.