

A Visit to the OAS
Washington DC
By Louise Actkinson, August, 2008

Thanks to Helena Richards, I had an introduction to Jorge Sanin, head of Relations with Permanent Observers and Civil Societies in the Department of International Affairs of the OAS. I was never able to arrange an appointment with him, so I arrived unannounced. He was in a meeting, but Aline Hommes, a specialist of OAS-USA Relations, proceeded to help me with my visit. I did meet Senor Sanin, but just for a moment between his meetings. His job is huge – and he has no staff, not even someone to answer his telephone! It became apparent throughout the day that OAS is suffering from mandates to do and no staff with which to do it. I was able to give him a copy of the Costa Rica Alliance Agenda and greeting from Pan American Round Table.

Ms. Hommes had a tour scheduled for later in the day for political science students from the University of Maryland and Georgetown. My friend and I were invited back. Upon our return, the front hall was full of people and energy. It was the National Day for Bolivia and a celebration with food and music and costumes was in full swing. When the students arrived, we toured the building (dedicated in 1910 with President Hoover presenting a peace tree that looms large in the atrium of the building.

Sherry Stephenson, Head of Institutional Relations in the Department of International Affairs, spoke with the students. We were in the main meeting room where the ministers of foreign affairs gather for discussion and action. She outlined the four pillars of emphasis for action: Democracy (I received a copy of the adopted charter); Human Rights and Justice (gangs, drugs, human trafficking); Multidimensional Security (de-mining areas); and Integral Development (economic and social, including such items as water, alternative energy sources, trade). Some activities of the OAS include numerous times being asked to serve as election observers. It was also the OAS that helped Ecuador and Columbia settle their border dispute just this summer.

Lastly, I was able to tour the Art Museum of the Americas which houses the OAS art collection. The building itself was funded in part by Andrew Carnegie and originally served as the home of the Secretary General of the OAS. It houses works of twentieth century artists including Amelia Pelaez, Joaquin Torres-Garcia, Emilio Pettoruti, Candido Portinari, and my personal favorite, Pedro Figari.

The OAS is located at 17th St. and Constitution Ave NW in Washington DC, 20006.